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CHILDREN
OF
EARTH

BY
SIDNEY
PATERNOSTER



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CHILDREN OF EARTH



Children of Earth

By

G. Sidney Paternoster

Author of "Gutter Tragedies," "The Motor Pirate," etc.

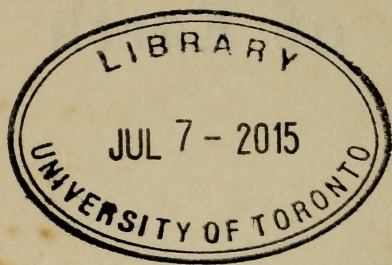


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CHILDREN OF EARTH

CHAPTER I

ONE fair morning in June some few years ago, a young man leaned carelessly upon a gate to watch the mist wreaths gradually tear themselves from a little village tucked away beneath them in a hollow—too small to be called a valley—scooped out in the heart of the Cotswolds. Fantastically they coiled themselves about the squat square-towered church and the low-eaved cottages, loth to leave their last stronghold even at the bidding of their master the sun. But uselessly they strove. One by one the coils of vapour were unravelled and caught up into the deep of the sky, and at last the whole of the village lay revealed.

“I wonder how long I can stand it?” murmured the watcher to himself. “Oxford has an air of repose, but Graysbourne seems outside the world altogether.”

He was justified in the thought. A silence that was only less than death, the breath of the same unseen presence which haunts the woodlands in the noon of autumn, brooded over the place, leaving its mark even upon the inhabitants of the score of thatched cottages clustering about the church, making them slow of speech and soft of voice, tempering even the spirits of the children with a most unchildlike gravity in their play. Indeed so isolated was Graysbourne from the world, that had it been suddenly destroyed by some cataclysm of nature, it is questionable whether the world would

ever have been any the wiser. And it was to this remote spot Frank Dalton had brought the redundant energies of youth which had secured his rustication. His eye dwelt again upon the scene. For six months he was to find in this spot employment for his activities. The prospect of amusement seemed infinitesimal. The rectory, his temporary home, sheltered from the rude breath of the east wind by a cluster of elms, he already knew offered him nothing. The only other house of any size—the long low farmstead occupied by Richard Ryeland—seemed to promise no better. The cottages of course did not count. He frowned and turned away from the prospect, but the frown was speedily lost in a jovial laugh, and he lit a pipe for solace as he swung away for a tramp over the uplands. “When I get back——” he said aloud and laughed again.

Dalton’s was an attractive laugh and brightened his face wonderfully. Not that in repose his face lacked charm, for the firm line of the mouth, the clear blue eyes, the ample brow, all bespoke intelligence, even as his well-knit figure pointed to active habits. It was indeed owing to this restless activity that he found himself stranded in such a backwater of life as Graysbourne proved itself to be. When he had left home for the University he had plunged into the dissipations of the new existence with a zest which no one who has not experienced the studied intolerance of a puritanical household could understand. This result might have been foreseen by any one but the head of such an household. It was, however, neither foreseen nor condoned by Frank Dalton’s father, who when his son was sent down from his college, declared that he regretted the paternity with an emphasis which awoke a certain reciprocity of sentiment for the first time in that young man’s mind. Then, in order to keep him from further mischief Mr. Dalton bethought himself of his old friend the rector of Graysbourne, and in due course Frank

found himself placed under the tutelage of the Reverend Samuel Byegrave.

At first rebellion had simmered in his mind, but after a day or two spent in the open air he began to take a different view of his own conduct. He saw his youthful excesses for what they really were. The simplicity of the life he was condemned to lead in consequence of them was invigorating. In the bright summer weather he became conscious that all nature was vocal. His mind became vibrant to her mellow tones, responsive to the thrill of pure delight which animates the lark's first song, fuller of melody than any of his later efforts. For him the wild flowers breathed a fresher fragrance as a morning salutation and the beechwoods whispered stories full of sighs and laughter. He seemed to have discovered that of all things living man alone is trivial. In a word, having drifted into one of the backwaters of life, he found the calm enjoyable.

Thus he mused as he brushed the dewdrops aside while he stepped briskly forward and even found himself hoping that for a little while no change should take place in his life unless—well, Arcadia was incomplete without Chloe or Amaryllis.

The sun was high in the heavens before he returned to the village, and the thought of breakfast quickened his steps. He turned aside from the track he had been following to take a short cut to the rectory across a meadow. In front of him was a stile, and as he approached it his eye caught a glimpse of a print dress. The wearer was approaching the stile from the opposite direction. He hastened still more, though no longer animated by thought of breakfast. Perhaps Amaryllis had come to meet him. He arrived first at the stile and was prepared to be disappointed. A village girl was coming towards him, her face half veiled under a huge sun-bonnet. Those of the village maidens whom he had seen hitherto had not attracted his fancy.

The girl seemed not to have noticed him, and started with amazement as she reached the spot where he stood and heard a voice offer to assist her in surmounting the stile.

Dalton saw beneath the sun-bonnet a sweet child face, and regretted instantly that the owner was so young.

"Let me help you over," he repeated, for she made no answer to his first inquiry.

"I do think I can manage by myself," she answered him with quaint gravity.

He laughed, and for reply leaned from the second bar and catching her by the waist swung her lightly over. She looked him frankly in the eyes and laughed too, with the unaffected gaiety of a child. Again he regretted that she was so young, for there was an undeniable beauty and grace in her face and figure.

"Thank you, sir," she said demurely, with an upward glance and a blush, and turned to depart.

"You are in a hurry, little one," he said pleasantly.

She halted again, and twisted the strings of the sun-bonnet into a knot, but made no answer.

"Do you live in the village? I haven't seen you before," he asked.

"Yes," she replied timidly. Then looking again into his face and apparently gaining courage from its expression she continued, "Are you the new curate, sir?"

"The Lord forbid," answered Dalton, and the heartiness of his disavowal raised a ripple of amusement to the rosy lips which had framed the question. "You won't have to wait long before seeing that gentleman, though," he continued; "I believe he arrives this afternoon."

Again the girl turned to depart and again Dalton arrested her steps with a question.

"May I ask your name, little one?"

“Lossie Grove.” She gave it without the slightest hesitation, and he repeated it after her.

Just then the sound of the gong thrumming out the call for prayers, and, more important to Dalton, breakfast, was borne upon the breeze.

“Good-bye, I shall see you again, Lossie,” he said, smiling as her timid “Good-bye, sir,” reached his ear as he sprang over the stile and set his face towards the rectory.

“I can scarcely consider it flattery to be confounded with the curate,” he murmured. “It is a pity she is so young. By Jove! she will be a beauty some day or I am very much mistaken. I wonder if she has an older sister? Arcadia might prove a pleasanter place than I have found it hitherto if there should happen to be a second Grove girl. Yet if Amaryllis proved to be stupid she would no longer be Amaryllis to me.” His thought turned to the curate of whose arrival that day the girl’s question had reminded him. Arcadia wanted only one thing to make it perfect. Dalton was already, after a fortnight’s experience of its simple pleasures, longing for the one thing he had not found in Grays-bourne. He had been thrown entirely upon himself for companionship, and a sympathetic ear—a feminine ear for choice—to be the recipient of his confidences would be a much-appreciated boon. But failing the feminine sympathiser a man with ideas and with speech to clothe his thoughts, would prove a veritable godsend to the exile. Dalton hoped for much amelioration of his loneliness through the arrival of the new curate.

CHAPTER II

THE curate had the usual number of ears allotted to man, but by no stretching of his imagination could Dalton fancy either of them likely to be the receptacle of his confidences. Indeed, from the moment of his introduction to the Reverend Robert Rawlins, Dalton had felt that there was something antipathetic about him. It was not merely the suave gravity of his voice and speech; those might be attributable to his professional training. Nor was the sallow complexion of the man, his lank dark hair with its precise parting, nor the vague colouring of his eyes responsible for Dalton's instinctive dislike. The curate could not be said to be more ill-looking than a hundred men with whom he had been on intimate terms after a bare half-hour's conversation. At some time or other everybody meets with his Dr. Fell, and it was unfortunate for Dalton that he should have met him in the person of the man with whom he would be brought into daily contact for three months at the least.

And if the Reverend Robert Rawlins was displeasing to Dalton, it soon became obvious to that young man that he was equally obnoxious to the new arrival at the rectory. The first conversation in which the two took part settled the matter once and for all.

Dinner was nearly done. Mrs. Bygrave had withdrawn her angular presence from the dining-room, and her husband, leaning back in his chair, placidly folded his hands upon the most convenient portion of his anatomy and eyed the decanter placed before him with an appreciative smile.

"A glass of port, Mr. Rawlins?" queried the rector with the solemn air he had borrowed from his neighbour the squire.

"It is not my habit to indulge," replied the curate, "but on this occasion——"

"There is no need to ask you, Frank, my boy," continued the rector as the curate passed the decanter to Dalton.

"I could not be guilty of so unmerited a slight upon your cellar," he replied.

The Reverend Samuel smiled. His vanity had been dexterously tickled. "I have a palate," he observed sententiously.

The curate raised his glass gravely. "May you long be spared to confer the benefit of your experience upon the younger generation, sir," he remarked.

The rector acknowledged the toast with every appearance of gratification. "The younger generation are always ready to take their elders' opinions upon a wine, but they are not quite so anxious to accept their views upon more important topics," he said.

"Generally speaking, sir, youth to-day is inclined to pay too little heed to the words of wisdom which drop from the lips of their elders," agreed the curate.

The rector wagged his head with grave approbation. "I am glad to find you of that mind, Mr. Rawlins. It will render our relations the more pleasant. There is no room for two opinions in so small a parish as this."

The curate bowed his head meekly. "You, sir, are my spiritual chief. I trust never to be found forgetful of my duty."

The rector smiled and laid his hand upon the box of cigars which had been placed at his elbow. "You smoke, Mr. Rawlins?" he asked.

The curate produced a cigarette case from his pocket and replied quietly, "With your permission, sir".

Dalton drew his breath hard and his lips framed the

epithet "toady," though not so softly but that it might have reached the ears of the younger cleric. But if that was the case the Reverend Robert Rawlins gave no sign of having heard it, for he handed the case to his critic with a perfectly even countenance.

"I prefer my own brand," said Dalton.

The curate allowed himself to smile and pocketed his case without remark. Meanwhile the rector had lit his cigar and now exhibited every sign of physical gratification. For a minute or two silence endured. It was the elder clergyman who broke it.

"I have said the parish is a small one, Rawlins." Already he felt he might safely drop the prefix without inviting undue familiarity. "Not two hundred inhabitants all told, but it requires looking after, and already I feel that the task is getting beyond me. Age will not be gainsaid, and when the flesh becomes weak, well—we must give the younger generation a chance."

"It must be with great regret, sir, that you find yourself compelled to limit the sphere of your activities," replied the curate.

Dalton smiled, for he knew that the worthy rector's activities had long been limited to the reading of the lessons twice a week, a labour supplemented occasionally by the declamation of an old sermon. He smiled at the curate but did not succeed in eliciting so much as a tremor of the eyelid in response.

"You are quite right," continued the rector; "indeed it is with heartfelt regret that I feel the work too great a burden to me. For forty years have I laboured single-handed here and I think I can safely assert that you will not find a better-ordered parish in the county." He refilled his glass and emptied it with the air of one toasting a benefactor of humanity.

"There is no schism in the village, then," hazarded the curate.

"None, sir, none," replied the rector warmly. "Dis-

sent is an abomination, and I have been careful to stamp out the very appearance of the thing. The squire has always assisted me in that. None but honest churchmen find a permanent home in the village."

"It is the best way," replied the curate. "A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump."

"Yes, once admit the dissenter and you open the floodgates to atheism and wholesale immorality. I have fought against it all my life."

"It would seem you have placed an easy charge in my hands," said the younger cleric.

"The vineyard requires watching lest the weeds grow up," remarked the Reverend Samuel Bygrave. The metaphor suggested another glass of wine, and the rector sipped it slowly while his eye beamed. "There has been a little irregularity of attendance at the services of late since I have been unable to go amongst the people as much as I used, but that I have no doubt you will soon remedy, Rawlins."

"You may depend upon my doing my best."

"A hint will probably suffice in most cases—a suggestion that the Christmas gifts will not be forthcoming unless their attendance is more regular, usually brings the laggards to their senses. I always believe in mild measures at first."

"I will bear your advice in mind," replied the curate, "though I must confess where the honour of the Church is at stake, I am apt to be somewhat impetuous."

"Age," declared the rector, "remedies that defect in most of our characters. I too was impetuous in my youth."

The pompous importance of the rector, and the studied deference accorded him by the younger clergyman, awoke a spirit of mockery in Dalton's mind. "Surely it is impossible to classify impetuosity in well-doing as a fault," he remarked.

"There speaks youth," said the curate.

"You will live and learn—live and learn," repeated the rector sententiously.

"I hope so," replied Dalton. "Though there seems to be little enough to learn in Graysbourne."

"A little lesson on self-control, perhaps," remarked the rector drily.

Dalton retorted briskly, "When I am old I shall probably repeat the phrase as easily as you do, Mr. Bye-grave."

The rector was not to be gainsaid. "I hope with as much reason," he remarked, and turning to the curate he continued, "I am afraid you will find my young friend here sadly lacking in reverence for spiritual things."

"The tendency of the age is towards materialism," remarked the curate with an air of advancing an original aphorism. "I thank God I have escaped so far. To me the spiritual is the essence of existence."

The rector coughed; the conversation was getting beyond the limits he imagined compatible with a proper digestive frame of mind. He turned the stream deftly into a more peptonic channel. "Quite right, Rawlins. Quite right. The materialist is only one degree better than a dissenter. There is a case in point in this village."

"Indeed?" queried the curate.

"I bet he has a bad time," remarked Dalton.

The rector paid no attention to the remark. "That sort of thing seems to be bred in the bone. Philip Grove's father was just such another."

"Philip Grove?" asked Dalton, his thoughts recurring to the maiden whom he had met at the stile that morning. It would be interesting to find in Amaryllis the daughter of the village ne'er-do-well. She certainly had not borne the appearance of a neglected child.

"Philip Grove," repeated the rector, "is his name. Like his father before him he never darkens the church door. The elder Grove carried his errors to the grave; I am afraid his son will follow his example."

"He shall be my special care," declared the curate fervently.

"I fear it will be of no use," said the Reverend Samuel Bygrave. "He is very like what his father was before him. And, as for the elder Grove, I went to see him when he was dying, at grave risk to myself. It was typhoid, I think. The villagers haven't the slightest idea of sanitation, and are utterly careless as to the water they drink, you know; but though he had not been to church for years I called upon him, hoping that at the last moment I should be able to rouse him to some sense of the peril in which he had placed his immortal soul. Will you believe it, Rawlins? After I had read to him; after I had reasoned with him, pointing out to him the delights of heaven and the horrors of hell, he looked up to my face and actually asked me where I was going. Me!"

"You said heaven, of course," remarked Dalton.

"No, heaven, I trust," replied the rector in a tone of grave reproof. "But it was not merely the question which seemed so remarkable to me. He thought for a moment, and then said quite clearly, 'Zend I to t'other place'. When I had recovered from my horror he had turned his face to the wall and was dead."

"Horrible!" remarked the curate.

Dalton hardly disguised a laugh before observing, "You used the occurrence in your next sermon, I suppose, sir."

The rector nodded. "I remember my text: 'Their worm shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched, and they shall be an abhorring unto all flesh'. It made a great sensation."

"And Grove is like his father?" asked Dalton musingly.

"The same type exactly, and many of the circumstances of their lives have been similar. The father was never married to Grove's mother, and the son persuaded

one of my servants, a girl whom my wife had taken from the workhouse and whom she had trained herself, to go to him without seeking the blessing of the church upon their union. Then as in the elder man's case his wife died in child-birth. Philip Grove was an only son, he has but one daughter. But trouble has not softened his heart, Rawlins. I fear you will do little with him."

"It is a sad case," remarked the curate, "and where you have failed to produce any effect, I can scarcely hope to succeed. But something may be done with the daughter. Is she of an age to appreciate her position?"

"She is quite a child still. Fourteen or fifteen at the most."

"Ah! Quite old enough to understand," replied the curate, "and with your permission, sir, as soon as I feel my feet in the parish I will see what I can do."

"Do anything you like, Rawlins. I am only too glad to have found a gentleman to whom I can safely entrust the care of the parish."

The Reverend Robert Rawlins bowed. Dalton rose from the table, and with a careless nod indicated his intention of indulging in a pipe outside. He could not trust himself to listen further to a conversation in which the two clerics enunciated principles, seemingly so antagonistic to the very elements of the faith they professed, without giving free vent to his thoughts, and he realised to do so would only give rise to a profitless wrangle. The calm assumption of the right to direct the thought of the villagers, the absolute unrecognition of any possibility that they might have an opinion of their own upon any question, appeared to him to be an arrogant assertion of the rights of the Godhead by priestly pretenders; while his host's naïve satisfaction in the damnation of the elder Grove, and the use he had made of the death-bed scene to point the moral of a sermon, awoke his indignation as much for its canting hypocrisy as for its exhibition of clerical intolerance.

That either of the two clerics should have been speaking in perfect good faith seemed to him an impossibility. In Dalton's view, the rector was a pleasure-loving old phrase-monger, destitute of one spark of sympathy for anyone who was not prepared to subscribe to his own narrow creed, while the curate presented himself as a somewhat clever tuft-hunter who would swallow a creed or a dinner with equal facility, so long as by so doing he could recommend himself to a patron.

His thoughts went back to the morning. Clearly his little Amaryllis was the daughter of the subject of the conversation. It was upon her unformed mind that the curate proposed to experiment. He found himself formulating the hope that his ministrations would be unsuccessful, and even cursing the evangelical fervour which should want to meddle with something so child-like and dainty. Perhaps he might be able to assist his little acquaintance. There was a line in the Reverend Robert Rawlin's forehead, an evenness in the line of his lips, which somehow conveyed the idea of a zealot, and zeal in religious matters not infrequently degenerated into persecution. From his own home experiences Dalton knew the type of man, and he foresaw trouble for the Groves if they did not bow down to the Reverend Robert's God. He might be able to act as their protector. It would have been a pleasanter task if only the maiden had been a little older. There were romantic possibilities in such a situation. But she was fifteen at the most. With all the clean-minded gravity of his twenty years, he decided that it was impossible for a man to fall in love with a child of fifteen, since it could only make him ridiculous.

He strolled up and down the rose-bordered walk of the rectory garden until the gloaming had settled into the semi-darkness of the cloudless summer night. The two clergymen were still in earnest colloquy. It was broken at last. He saw them rise and enter the draw-

ing-room together. Mrs. Bygrave, awakened from her after-dinner slumber by their entrance, rang for coffee. He stepped to the window to join them and was just in time to catch the full-toned voice of the rector as he remarked to his wife: "Congratulate me, my dear, in finding a most estimable young gentleman to assist me. We have had a long talk and I am sure we shall get on admirably together."

Then Dalton knew for certain that his hopes of companionship through the advent of the curate were doomed to fail of fruition.

CHAPTER III

ONE reason why Dalton had not done justice to the Reverend Robert Rawlins's character was that familiarity with the type had bred contempt for its accompanying qualities. But in the village the curate achieved a measure of popularity. He could assume a sympathetic air when he chose. His usual manner, if bearing a faint assumption of superiority, was kind; he certainly could preach a sermon in words suited to the comprehension of his hearers, and when other methods failed, he could always win a smile by the bestowal of a generous shilling upon the youngest member of the household he was visiting. Within a fortnight he had made acquaintance with the whole of his parishioners with the single exception of the Groves, father and daughter, and he had only omitted the formality in their case lest the success of his efforts should seem to have disparaged the worthy rector's previous attempts. For a formality it really seemed to him. The villagers were very pliant compared with the slum dwellers from whom he had recently escaped, and he could not imagine that any one amongst them should prove of entirely different clay to the rest of the pots.

The lack of intellectual companionship in the parish did not trouble him in the same manner that it troubled Dalton. He was self-sufficing if not self-sufficient. And as far as social functions and amusements were concerned they had never been cultivated by him. The deference of the villager and the respect of the yeoman were a far more grateful incense to his nostrils than

invitations to tea and tennis from villadom or the odd place at the table of a social superior. The sweet savour of his favourite perfume he therefore set himself to obtain, and he was gratified to observe how soon the caps came to hand when he was recognised. In the farm-houses he was also welcomed, though with slightly more restrained cordiality. Yet here too he was pronounced as "not a bad sort," and if his presence was not deemed the acquisition he expected by the women folk, that was probably due to the incidence of the hay-harvest, which left little time for devotion to parochial schemes. He recognised that he might be in the way during the busy seasons and forbore to assert himself. There would be plenty of time in the future for that. From the inmates of one house, he particularly determined that his merits should receive adequate recognition. The reason, of course, was purely feminine. The home farm, which had been in the possession of Richard Ryeland for thirty years, and in the occupation of that hearty yeoman's father and grandfather before him for a period at least as long, was graced by as dainty a specimen of budding womanhood as ever blossomed in the wilderness. The Reverend Robert Rawlins had caught a glance from Ruth Ryeland's bright eyes and appreciated their attractiveness. He saw her at church and marked with approbation her pretty reverence during the service. Some of that reverence was certainly his meed. But the girl seemed to be oblivious of the fact. When he had paid his visit to the home farm she had taken the first opportunity to leave him to be entertained by her mother, and he had seen her romping on the lawn outside the house with a puppy. To play second fiddle to a puppy was not in the curate's eyes a position commensurate with his dignity.

But of the first importance in his view was the reformation of Philip Grove, and when the first fortnight had elapsed he thought it was time to put into action

the plan he had formulated for the purpose. Accordingly one brilliant morning he set out for the Groves' cottage. He calculated on the man being absent, and reckoned upon the girl proving pliable material.

Grove's cottage was the last in the village and, arriving before it, the curate paused at the garden gate to survey it before entering. The dwelling itself in no way differed from the residences of the other villagers. It was merely a low-thatched, one-storied, two-roomed cottage with diamond-paned lattice windows. But the strip of garden between the cottage and the road differed vastly from the front gardens of the other cottages. Inside the little brown weather-worn wicket the narrow path which led to the door was hedged with a wild glory of bright-hued old-fashioned flowers. Sweet-scented stocks were massed together round the huge fire-bosses of crimson pæonies. The orange-flamed tropæolum flung itself over the palings wherever the more delicately hued canariensis left a vacant space. Tall hollyhocks and sunflowers turned their faces to the sun. A big fuschia shook its purple tassels over the porch and a mass of white roses covered the side of the house, some even climbing high enough to lay their cheeks against the warm thatch. At the very lintel the bright blue eyes of the lobelia peeped out of the crevices of the stones. The sense of the wild luxuriance forced itself upon the curate to his discomfort. His eyes ranged from one spot of vivid colour only to rest upon another.

He passed up the path. It was a relief to him when the sober brown of the door met his eyes. Colour distressed him. Had he possessed the power he would have dressed the world in a monotone and illumined it with the slate-coloured beams of a vapour-veiled sun, for to him profusion of colour was almost synonymous with lack of morality.

In semi-protest against the brilliance he gave an em-

phatic knock on the door with his stick. It flew open with a rapidity which startled him. Evidently his approach had been remarked and his summons awaited. For a few moments his eyes, dazed with the outer light, refused to take in the details of the interior revealed to him. When at last he could see clearly the girl who had opened the door, the effect upon him was very similar to that produced by the flowers in the garden. She was not at all the girl he had expected to find. He had anticipated meeting an untidy, uncared-for little slattern, but the child facing him with big, questioning eyes the tint of the wild hyacinth, with cheeks flushed with health and framed in flying curls which matched in their hue the gold of the beechwoods in autumn, was nothing like the creature of his imagination. But Mr. Rawlins was not long in recovering his self-possession.

"Are you Charlotte Grove, Philip Grove's daughter?" he remarked benignly.

"Yes." She stood twisting with her delicate hands a grandmotherly shawl about her shoulders and waited for him to continue.

"Then I should like to have a little chat with you, Charlotte."

She still looked at him with so evident a curiosity that he felt uncomfortable.

"Who be you, I should like to know?" she ventured at last.

"If you had performed your duty, my child, and attended church on either of the last two Sundays there would have been no necessity to ask that question," he replied still benignly. "I am your rector's curate, and I have come to inquire how it is that I have not seen you either at church or at Sunday school."

A ripple of laughter from the interior followed the conclusion of the sentence, and a voice said: "It's all right, Lossie, you may let him in".

The girl held back the door and the curate passed inside. "Miss Ryeland," he gasped, as a girl rose from a straight-backed arm-chair and held out her hand to him in a frank greeting. "What! You here. Really, I am surprised. This is—ah—the last place in which I should have expected to find you."

"Indeed?" There was a veiled challenge in the girl's voice. "I am afraid that if I had not taken other people's duties on my shoulders Lossie here would have been very lonely."

The curate declined the challenge. He dropped into a chair and fanned himself with his hat while he remarked: "Ah, yes! To be sure—it is—ah—very warm, don't you think?"

"Very warm," assented the girl as she lazily followed his example.

There was silence between them for a space. The Reverend Robert was for the moment taken aback by the presence of the only daughter of the sturdy yeoman in whose employ Philip Grove had been from boyhood. He had been quite prepared to talk to the villager's child, but the presence of the farmer's daughter drove out of his thoughts the pretty moral lecture he had prepared. The fact was that the very first time he had seen Ruth Ryeland he had been forced to admire her. Her clear grey eyes looking out from under long lashes had a disturbing effect upon him. He had blamed himself for remembering the creamy whiteness of her skin, and the ripple in her brown hair drawn back from her low broad forehead. At a total loss as to how he should proceed with his errand, he could only reiterate his previous remark:—

"Really, I am surprised to see you here."

"Why?" demanded Ruth with some asperity.

"Because—ah——" He paused to think, then rushed into the pitfall prepared for him. "Because it hardly

seems the proper thing for you to be so intimate with—ah—the child of one of your father's labourers."

Ruth's cheek flushed slightly. The curate was quick to perceive it.

"You must pardon me speaking so abruptly, so plainly, Miss Ryeland; my vocation is at once my authority and my excuse."

"Your vocation," repeated the girl softly. The opportunity she had often longed for had come. The opportunity of speaking her thoughts on the clerical intolerance which had sought to make an outcast of the child, even as it had sought to make an outcast of her father. But now the chance had arrived, she found the words to express her thoughts had fled. She turned to her companion, who had been standing quietly behind her. "Lossie, come here," she said.

The younger maiden came timidly and placed her hand in the one outstretched to grasp it. Ruth Ryeland took it between her own palms, smoothing it tenderly. Then she looked up in the curate's face.

"Really," she said with a smile, "this hand seems of the same material as my own."

The curate gasped. What reply could he make to an observation which to him appeared so irrational. He should have liked to have answered with a flat contradiction, but there was a look in Ruth's eyes which told him it might be better to merely follow the well-worn path of platitude.

"But your paths in life are so wide apart, your lot so different in every respect, that there is a danger of your awakening wishes and desires in this child which would be a danger to her in the future."

"It had not occurred to me that my companionship would prove dangerous to anyone," remarked Ruth frigidly.

"Ah—no," replied the curate hastily. "Not—ah—of itself, that is. But there is always the danger, you

know, of awakening desires that cannot be gratified in—ah—the position in which God has pleased to place us.”

Ruth allowed him to proceed no further. “Don’t you think it is rather too warm for a theological argument, Mr. Rawlins,” she said. “Besides, Lossie here is dying to know to what she is indebted for the honour of this visit.”

Mr. Rawlins made a brave effort to fulfil the mission he had projected. He spoke directly to the younger girl.

“I—ah—came to have a talk with you, to—ah—see if I could not persuade you to come to church, to—ah—use your influence with your father to induce him to come to church too.”

“I do think,” replied Lossie, encouraged to speak by the warm pressure of her companion’s hand, “I do think that it would be no manner of use.”

“And,” said Ruth Ryeland, “don’t you think, Mr. Rawlins, that it would be fairest to go straight to Grove.”

There was a savour of asperity in the tone of his reply.

“I am well aware of what constitutes my duty, Miss Ryeland,” he said. “I grieve that you should have thought fit to have placed any obstacle in the way of my performing it. Rather I should have thought that you would have assisted me in doing my utmost to place the feet of this child on the one secure path——”

His voice had swelled into the cadence of the sermon. An ill-suppressed titter from Lossie stopped him suddenly. She was stuffing the corner of the shawl in her mouth to restrain open laughter. His face grew red. He rose from the chair on which he had been seated.

“I am afraid you are not in a fitting frame of mind this afternoon to listen to what I wish to say,” he said. “Good afternoon, Miss Ryeland.”

He was so intent upon making a dignified exit that he reached the wicket before he discovered that he had left his walking-stick behind. It was a malacca, gold-mounted, a favourite. While he hesitated whether to return for it or not he saw Lottie at the door with the stick in her hand. She came down the pathway towards him pausing on the way to pluck a crimson rose which had unfolded every petal to its fullest extent.

"Oh, if you please, sir," she said sedately as she reached his side, "here is your stick, and please would you wear this rosebud just to show there's no ill-feelin'?"

The Reverend Robert Rawlins smiled. It seemed to him as if his method had proved successful. The withdrawal of his presence had awakened a regret. He graciously accepted the flower from the girl. He even allowed her to pin it in his coat. He felt almost inclined to return and possibly would have done so, save for the thought that it would not be dignified to unbend too rapidly. But as he stepped away he heard a dual peal of laughter from the cottage and knew that he had been the victim of a prank. It was with difficulty he restrained his anger until he was out of sight of the cottage, but when he had passed the next turn of the road he tore the rose from his coat and scattered the petals savagely in the dust.

If they had known anything of the real nature of the man whom they had flouted, the two girls would at least have decently veiled the expression of their contempt. But with the heedlessness of youth they awakened in the Reverend Robert Rawlins's soul all the petty malice which lay hidden there. With him anger, however quickly born, did not die easily. He had an immense idea of his own dignity, though he was wont to attribute his insistence upon being treated with respect, to a desire that his Church should be duly honoured even in the person of its meanest representa-

tive. He had seen himself ridiculed by two girls, and what was more natural for him than to determine that it was his manifest duty to bring them to see the error of their ways. If it was necessary that they should suffer in the process—well, chastisement was an orthodox means of regenerating the graceless. He felt that he would not be satisfied until they exhibited some signs of penitence. There was a bitter smile about his lips as the idea of playing priestly consoler to so fair a penitent as Ruth Ryeland came home to him.

He had rambled for some distance as he mused, turning unconsciously into a field path. This path led him to a disused quarry. One side of it was in shade. He suddenly realised that he was bathed in perspiration so he sought a seat in the shadow. It was a very charming nook. Just the place for a cigarette. As the smoke curled upwards the curate's fluttered mind became calmer. His surroundings added to the soothing process. Soft mosses had covered up the roughnesses of the riven rock, tender lichens had woven a deft tracery of gold and silver over the more exposed portions. Grasses greener than those which grew in the meadow had sprung up on the patches of loam which nature's hand had pressed into the hollows of the floor, and the ribbons of the hart's tongue drooped from the crevices. The viper's bugloss, pink-budded, blue-flowered, guarded a heap of rubble with its forest of spines as if it were protecting a treasure trove, and in front of a little cave a sweet briar threw down a curtain of the rosiest of blossoms. Even he could not fail to be soothed by the absolute quiet pervading the place, to be impressed by the busy stillness in which nature works to cover up the scars made by man in her bosom. It was grateful to him.

He set himself seriously to think out a plan for what he was pleased to call "the conversion" of the Groves, father and daughter. Now the Reverend Robert Raw-

lins, in spite of his meek appearance, was of a tenacious disposition. Not possessed of many ideas, when a thought did gain possession of his mind it remained there and, in the carrying out of his ideas, he never wavered in his progress towards the end he had in view. As boy or as young man none of his companions or masters had ever credited him with cleverness, and yet he usually managed to achieve the few things he set his mind upon. At the university he had been dubbed "St. Smith" so perfectly had he realised the ideal of bourgeois piety. By the same mouth he had been declared to be a man of one idea and no ideals, and when asked what was the one idea the reply had been "Robert Rawlins". There was a considerable element of truth in this analysis of the curate's character. At the back of his sober demeanour and professional piety there lay a purpose, a purpose which he pursued as determinedly as his father had striven for the acquisition of wealth. His father, a man of no education, had been successful in his aims, and it was his son's ambition to add to his heritage a social position in which he should forget his childhood's reminiscences of the grocery business. He had deliberately chosen the Church as a profession because it seemed to him to offer him the best chance of fulfilling this meagre ambition. But having chosen his vocation, it was characteristic of the man that he should have thrown himself whole-heartedly into the work. Whatever the motive which animated the choice of his profession there was no doubt but that he would have been correctly described as an earnest and devoted son of the Church. Partly this was due to the fact that work, in the form of a daily round of trivial detail, was essential to his comfort. From finding the work necessary to him to fancying himself necessary to the work was a small step. In his first curacy his ideas on the point had been held in check by a vigorous vicar.

Now the time had arrived when the restraining hand was no longer upon him, and the fact boded ill for anyone who slighted the Church in his person and who was not in a position to hold his own.

While yet he turned over a number of plans in his mind a shadow fell across the sunlit turf and, looking up, Rawlins saw a man "broad and high-boned of face" as one of the Volsungs, coming into the quarry. The newcomer was a stranger to him, yet in one of those premonitions which startle with their accuracy, the curate felt that this was Philip Grove. He was a man of big proportions, broad in the shoulder and narrow in the hips, a man who would have been symmetrically perfect if following the plough had not rounded his shoulders and robbed his stride of its grace.

The new comer slouched into the quarry with his eyes bent on the ground, not noticing the curate until he was close upon him, and then merely honouring the black-garbed form with a rustic stare. Seating himself in the shade, the man untied the red cotton handkerchief in which his mid-day meal was wrapped and commenced to eat. He knew the cool spot well, and had selected it as the pleasantest place in which to spend the hour he had at his disposal. He was not going to retreat merely because it happened to be occupied by one whom he recognised by his dress as an hereditary enemy.

As for the curate, he saw that if his surmise were correct that an early opportunity was afforded him of saying a second word in season. It was easy to verify his supposition.

"Good morning, my man," he began in a patronising tone.

"Marnin'," was the somewhat sullen response.

"I think you must be Philip Grove?" he continued.

“Zhure you be about right, measter,” replied the labourer with his mouth full of bread and cheese.

The curate smiled. The opportunity was so favourable. The casual meeting, a friendly conversation upon ordinary topics supplemented by a few kindly words of personal interest, would lead up to the broaching of the more personal matter. The man looked mild enough. Probably the apparent sullenness was merely awe. These people were always tongue-tied in the presence of their masters and betters. So he reasoned, and set himself to break down this reserve. He talked about the weather and exposed his ignorance of crops and horses and cattle, but received only monosyllabic replies while Philip Grove steadily demolished his bread and cheese. Then, his dinner finished, Grove, looking at the shadows to assure himself that time permitted, drew a pipe from his pocket, and settled himself comfortably for a smoke in the delicious shade.

The curate had found his task more difficult than he had anticipated, owing to Grove's taciturnity. He determined to plunge straight into the question he had at heart. In his most dulcet tones he asked the labourer if he desired his daughter to forgo all the benefits, spiritual and temporal, which the Church could bestow.

Grove replied with an inarticulate grunt.

Rawlins, translating the ejaculation as a negative, enlarged on the theme, buttressing his discourse with innumerable texts.

Grove's grunts became fewer, less articulate. He turned his face away, and the curate saw that the pipe had been allowed to burn out.

The curate tasted the triumph of the successful missionary. He brought his pleadings to a close with a passionate adjuration to the sinner to mend his ways. Grove's head had dropped on his hand. The attitude was clearly full of remorse. The curate rose softly and

walked towards the listener with the intention of laying his hand on the penitent's shoulder while he whispered consolation in his ear.

But alas for his hopes, one glance at Grove's face shattered them. Philip slept.

Even curates are but mortal, and to be so calmly ignored would have tried the patience of a much less self-conceited mortal than the Reverend Robert Rawlins. His hand fell on Grove's shoulder, but not with the paternal touch of the priest. The man started, and rubbed his eyes drowsily.

"Zhure, I must uv vell azleep," he murmured. Then recognising the curate and, apparently feeling that some apology was necessary, he continued, "Volk do zay as 'ow zarmons zend 'em to zleep; I 'aven't tried 'em avore, but now I zhould zay as volk be mostly right."

He turned and would have departed, but the curate arrested his steps.

"One minute, my man. I have something more to say to you."

The rector had been correct in his judgment of the character of this man. To reason with him was merely casting pearls before swine. The Reverend Robert had not the faintest doubt but that his glass beads were pearls. No savage ever decked himself with his tawdry finery with more delight than Rawlins invested his speech with the orthodox clerical intonation and idioms. And he had gone to the trouble for the sole benefit of this labourer and had merely succeeded in sending him to sleep. No wonder there was a certain harshness in his tone.

"Whoy didn't thee zay it avore then?" demanded Philip. "I han't got no time to waste a listenin' to paazon volk."

"You need not fear. I am not going to waste many words on you, Grove."

"That be a main good job," interjected the labourer.

“But let me give you to understand once and for all,” continued the curate, heedless of the interruption, “that if you do not mend your ways and come to church, if you do not see that your daughter comes to church, you will not find life go so smoothly with you in the future as it has in the past. Now don’t interrupt me, my good man”—as Philip gave signs of replying—“the rector has already told me all about you and your refusal to listen to his remonstrances, but I will teach you that you have a stronger man than he to deal with.”

“What harm do I?” queried Grove sullenly.

“Harm—harm?” stuttered the curate, talking fast and loud. “You don’t show a proper reverence for your superiors, you set a bad example to the other men, to say nothing about your duty to your Maker.”

“Be there aught else?” demanded the labourer as the curate paused for breath.

The Reverend Robert Rawlins thought his dictatorial tone had proved effectual. He determined to make his intentions thoroughly understood.

“Yes, there is something else. I want you to understand, Grove, that your daughter must be in her place at Sunday school next Sunday morning. I will myself strive to make her realise the state of wickedness in which she has been allowed to grow up.”

The curate had woefully mistaken the labourer’s silence. He had been so accustomed to meek deference that when Grove turned upon him with a burst of anger he was totally unprepared to meet it.

“D’ye mean that youm be a g’wain’ to try an’ turn my gel agin I?” said Philip, while his eyes flashed defiance. “To teach her to look upon I as the muck in the road because I do-unt touch my ’at to ee when I do meet ee in the way. Now look ee ’ere, paazon,” and he strode nearer to the shrinking cleric, “have done wi’ this talk once an’ for all. I’ve ’ad dom well enow of thy sort. When my mother were a dyin’ th’ rector

never comed near ; when veyther wor g'wain' off, th' old zmooth tongue tried to tarment his laast hour ; when my own little wife were a zlippin away vor want of the comvorts as every woman in th' village were given but she, narry a pusson comed nigh her ; an' now youm wantin' to zet my Lossie agin I. I oonder what keeps my 'and off ee——"

Philip's anger had risen to white heat. He made a half step towards the curate. Rawlins shivered with apprehension at sight of the wrath he had provoked.

"Bah, I ben't a g'wain' to touch ee," declared Grove contemptuously, "I only vights wi' men, unless"—there was an ominous ring in his voice—"unless I vinds ee meddlin' in any ways wi' my avvairs. If you do so, well look ee out if thee doesn't want the life shaken out of thee shrivelled little corpse."

With this final warning Philip Grove turned and strode away, and not until he was lost to sight did Rawlins venture to leave the spot. His face was pale as he walked towards the rectory, but his lips were set tightly and there was an unpleasant light in his eyes.

CHAPTER IV

THE encounter with the curate had the effect of making Philip Grove uneasy in his mind. Slow-witted he was, like many of his fellows, but the whole of his experience had been of a nature to make him distrustful of the inhabitants of the rectory. It was because of his father's feud with the rector that his childhood had been peculiarly solitary. The elder Grove had been shunned somewhat lest the show of friendliness should bring down upon those who expressed it the wrath of Rectory and Hall, and almost unconsciously the children had been shy of making a playfellow of the boy who never sat beside them at the church school. The lack of companionship made him timid in his boyhood, and it was not until his marriage that he numbered any of the other villagers amongst his intimates.

His marriage in fact really awakened his dormant sensibilities. His wife in the short year of their married life was proud as well as fond of him and showed her pride. Her confidence in him begot in him a similar feeling. Her love for him did still more. She was wont to wait at the cottage door for his home-coming, to fill a glass with fresh plucked roses for the table in the summer time, to keep a bright bit of fire burning in the winter against his return, and welcome him with the hundred little devices which make of the humblest dwelling-place a home.

A sterner awakening had come when his wife died. The loss embittered him, made him morose at times. He fell back to his old brooding habits at first, and passed days without exchanging a friendly word with

any one, but later the craving for companionship came upon him and he no longer held himself aloof.

While grief at his wife's death was still strong upon him he had almost a feeling of repulsion for the daughter whose birth had robbed him of the mother. When the village midwife who had taken charge of the infant inquired what name should be bestowed on the child he had been so indifferent that he had told the dame to please herself. The woman had named the girl Charlotte, and the infant's first attempts to syllable her own name gave her the diminutive by which she became known.

Philip had placed his daughter in the charge of one of the other labourers' wives, but when she blossomed into girlhood and openly showed her preference for her father's companionship to that of the members of the family in which she had been brought up, his parental feelings awoke. Before she was ten she was installed in Grove's cottage as housekeeper and, by the time five years had elapsed, she had made another home for him, and it was the fear, dimly conceivable to him, that it might be in the curate's power to do something to upset this home which had prompted his reply. He brooded over the matter for the rest of the day as he went about his work. Even when he reached home his brow had not cleared, and Lossie, quick to notice any change in his face, inquired the cause.

"What's the matter, father?" she asked, as she threw her arms about his neck for the usual hug.

"I'll tell ee, little-un, when we-uns ha' done wi' tea," he replied, his face clearing under the influence of the warm caress.

When the meal was finished, Grove seated himself in the porch, and when his pipe was well alight the child nestled to his side to coax from him the story of the matter which had troubled him.

"Nobody shall ever come atween thee an me, little-un?" His hand hung caressingly over her curls.

"Nobody, never—dear father." The child's gay spirit had stooped to seriousness. She spoke with conviction.

Grove's hand fell on the curls and smoothed them gently. "Thee an' me 'll allus stick together?"

"Ever—always." Then came the natural query. "But why should you ask me such questions?"

"Th' paazon chap as been a zarmonizing I to-day, little-un, tellin' as 'ow I be to zend ee to Zunday school an' I be aveard as 'ow ee wants to zet ee against I."

"What, the curate?" queried the girl. "He called here this morning too."

"You zent un to th' right about zharp, I hopes?" said Philip anxiously.

Lossie gave a bright account of the morning's amusement.

"Zhure, Miss Ruth be a good zort," remarked Grove when his daughter had finished the story. "Zhe do 'ave some fellow veelin vor them as bain't 'er ekals."

"She's a darling," declared Lossie enthusiastically. "She is as nice to me as if I were her own sister."

Philip felt more contented. His master's daughter would prove no mean ally if his clerical enemies should take any steps towards depriving him of his employment. Yet at the same time the thought of the curate having called at his cottage in order to see his daughter rankled in his mind. He did not feel quite sure that nothing could come between Lossie and himself. Partly the feeling was due to the fact that the girl had received a rudimentary education and he was possessed of the natural jealousy of the illiterate towards the person who could read and write. It was the one source of friction between them. Lossie was fond of reading such story books as came her way but her father anathematised them, declaring that a labourer's child had no "call to stuff her yud vull o' printed stuff". Again, in the companionship and under the tuition of Ruth Ryeland she

had lost to some extent the broad accent of the village children. This irritated Grove with the belief that she was "tryin' to talk like a vine laady". Then too there was one trait in her character he could not understand, a fresh and simple delight in nature's beauties, which is rarely found in those who dwell amongst them. He did not know what to make of her desire to get away alone into the meadows when they were glowing with the cowslip gold of the spring, or of her delight in the woodlands when the ruddy hand of autumn was laid upon the foliage. He felt none of these desires and he wanted his child to have no thoughts which he could not share lest she should learn to look upon him with contempt.

"None o' they paazon volk ull ever larn ee to zlight thee veyther, little-un?" he asked.

For answer Lossie went closer to him until she found a resting place on his knee and had laid her head on his rough waistcoat. She said nothing, and the night grew up about them as they looked out to the west over the tops of the hollyhocks while the scent of the stocks strengthened. Nor did they stir until the lamp gleams shone out from the windows of the distant farmhouse. Then Grove rose, and telling Lossie to go to bed strolled off in the direction of the village.

He turned mechanically in the direction of the village public-house. He would be certain to find some sympathetic ears at that poor man's club. The taproom seemed very hot when he entered it, and the half dozen occupants who preferred the low-ceiled room with its reek of tobacco and beer to the fresh air outside were talking noisily together. Grove called for a pint of beer but it scarcely counted for anything. The close air made him tremendously thirsty.

"Hi! missus. Give us a quaart o' thee vour ale," he shouted.

That was better. He could not see the bottom of

the pot at the first draught. Nevertheless it did not quench his thirst. The pot was followed by a second. His brain began to cast off its burden of fear. He joined in a dull chorus heartily, and shouted his approval when a pedlar who chanced to be of the company danced a hornpipe on the table. Later his usual taciturnity had completely departed and he related the story of his encounter with the curate to the rest of the company.

"I ben't a goin' to knuckle under to any paazon," he declared at the close, with the beer in his hand and on his tongue.

"Brayvo," shouted his hearers. "We'm men enow to stand by ee vor zartin."

Grove called for another pot and sent it round.

Wisdom spoke from the mouth of the pedlar. "What's the use o' fighting squire or paazon. They are stronger than you. The 'ave only to say the word and out you go. You lose your job. You've got to make yourself a new 'ome, an' when you've got a new job an' a new 'ome, well, yer finds a new paazon the very spit o' the old 'un. Grin an' bear it, that's what I say."

"Danged if I 'ull," declared Philip.

"You know best," said his adviser. "But times bain't like they was years ago when workin' chaps could make the measters pay. You don't never see merry men dancin' round flamin' ricks nowadays. It bain't no use. These new-fashioned hinsurances ha' altered all that. As often as not they'd be dom glad to 'ave their ricks burnt down. You 'ull do best to take no notice."

Philip fell into a reverie while the remainder of the company waxed more noisy until the shrill voice of the dame who kept the house bade them begone to their homes. They carried their arguments within them into the quiet night. Some went one way, some another. Philip was soon alone. He was glad of solitude. He wanted to think, but somehow his brain was all

muddled. A vision of dancing flames was before his eyes. He saw nothing else as he entered his door and stumbling across the room threw off his coat and lay down on the bed in the corner.

Lossie, awakened by his entrance, wondered at his uncertain step and crept out of her bed to peep at him through the crevice of the door, but the room was dark and she could not see his face.

"I wish father would never go to the public," she murmured. She went to the casement, drew back the curtain and let in the moonlight. There she waited until Philip's heavy breathing told her that he slept. Then she dropped the curtain with something like a sigh, the soft tangled locks rested again on the pillow and sleep taking her by the hand led her into a pleasant country.

CHAPTER V

THE sun rose next morning with a crimson veil about him, but there was none to translate the portent as being ominous to any of the inhabitants of Grays-bourne.

Philip Grove awoke as was his wont with the sun. The foolishness of the night was past, only a bare memory of it remained as of some unpleasant dream. The freshness of a sweet June morning cleared his brain somewhat and, after a dip of his head in a bucket of water cold from the well, even the memory faded.

His scanty toilet over, the man raised his voice. "Lossie, Lossie, where are ye lass?"

"Yes, father, coming." She ran in at the cottage door with an apron full of pink-horned honeysuckles, tossing them carelessly on the floor before clasping her arms about his neck for the morning salute.

"Where did ee get all they 'oodbines?" asked Philip. "I han't zeed zo many all the zummer."

"The summer's not so old," said the girl laughing. "These came from the edge of the spinny where the sun lights first when he peeps over the hill," she explained.

"Vine marnin'. Zeems vresher like though there do-unt 'pear to 'ave been any fall in the night," said Grove as he pulled a chair to the table on which the breakfast was already spread.

"Not a drop of rain, though the dew lies nigh as thick on the grass as the dust on the roads," replied Lossie.

"You 'ull ruin thee shoes wi' the wet an' they 'ull ha' to last ee till Michaelmas, little-un."

"There, I knew you were only half awake," she said laughing, "or else you would have seen I wasn't wearing my boots." She held up a rosy little foot for his inspection.

"Come ee off the cold stwuns," cried Philip. "It do-unt do ee any hurt to tread the turf but the stwuns 'ull give ee thy death o' cold."

"It was just beautiful"—the thought of her ramble was still in her mind—"the drinking cups of the fairies were all full."

A hunch of bread paused half way to Philip's mouth. "What be ee talkin' about now?"

Lossie lifted a cluster of the scented blossoms. "See the little curled cups, full of fresh water. That's where the fairies drink."

"Oo be after tellin' ee tha' nonsense," asked Philip.

"Maybe 'tis nonsense, but it's pretty to think about," replied the maiden. "I stood at my window last night and fancied I could see them drinking there, but I'm sure I was wrong, for this morning I didn't find an empty cup."

Philip was silent. Lossie was in one of the moods in which he hardly knew her. He could not tell whether she spoke in jest or earnest. He harked back to the weather.

"It 'ull zhurely be main hot. Mebbe we 'ull get the rest o' th' hay in avore nightfall."

"I shall come and help with the rest," declared his daughter.

"Vat lot o' use you ull be, little-un. Still I do reckon as 'ow measter wo-unt zend ee away."

So they chatted till Grove went forth to his daily toil. His eyes were turned earthwards, but the dew-drops were still there to remind him of the sparkle in

Lossie's eyes and of the brightness of her voice. The day had begun well for him.

The sound of the splashing of water, the knocking of brooms against the wainscot, the hissing of rashers in the frying-pan and the odour of bacon and coffee heralded the commencement of another day at the farm-house.

By seven o'clock the family had gathered around the breakfast table, Richard Ryeland entering last, for he had already been abroad to start his men on their daily tasks. He was a big man and a hearty, handsome in much the same way as his favourite bull would have been considered handsome. His limbs had been allowed full scope in their growth and his body had been well developed by exercise. His mind, unfortunately, in accordance with the same natural law which had allowed his body to develop, had become atrophied, except in one direction. So far as the management and cultivation of his farm were concerned or in the sale of his produce, his shrewdness was well known to the whole countryside. But of anything apart from these engrossing subjects he knew nothing. He looked like an actual embodiment of the good old times in which nearly everybody believes, and a casual acquaintance would leave him imagining himself the better for having met so fine a specimen of the old English yeoman. His labourers would have told a different tale, for there was not a harder master on the Cotswolds, and the tradesmen with whom he dealt knew him as the most close-fisted man who ever favoured them with his custom, while the squire from whom he rented his 1200 acres was used to declare, that if he had not been so excellent a farmer and kept his land in such perfect order, he would have got rid of him long ago, since he was always prepared with some skilfully framed excuse for obtaining a remission of some portion of his rent,

The day had begun well for him, too, and his face glowed with content as he seated himself at the table.

"We'll be in a fair way to finish the hay to-day," he remarked.

"The barometer is falling fast," replied his wife as she poured out the coffee.

"There's no sign of change at present," he replied. "That glass is always playing the fool. I am only afraid that the sun may get too hot. There's hardly a breath of air stirring now, and by noon——" He commenced to eat before he finished his sentence.

His wife took up the conversation. She was a wearied looking woman, with a faded complexion, faded hair and a faded manner.

"We ought to be thankful the weather has been so fine," she remarked.

"I don't know about that," muttered her husband. "Even if we do get it in all right, the crop is so light we shall have to keep every bit of it for the stock, and this year it will be worth I don't know how much a ton."

"That's so like you, Richard," replied the woman plaintively. "You are always saying I am the discontented one, yet you always find something to grumble at."

The farmer merely grunted for reply.

"I suppose you will want the maids and all out in the fields again to-day," continued his wife.

"Everyone of them," he answered emphatically. "You and Ruth will have to manage meals between you. We ought to be able to finish right out to-day. I shan't be in for dinner. You had better bring me a bite out to the ten-acre, we'll be nigh there about noon."

So the farmer continued giving his orders disjointedly while his wife and daughter listened dutifully. For all of them the day had begun brightly.

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The sun had been up some hours before there were signs of life in the rectory, but the freshness of the morning had not entirely departed when the rector came drowsily into the breakfast room and stood yawning at the open window. The scent of the hay and the fragrance of the flowers were an enticement. He looked at the clock. The time was fifteen minutes of nine. He had just a quarter of an hour to spare. He carefully adjusted his silken skull cap and accepted the invitation of the garden. A minute later the angular form of his wife occupied the position he had vacated. But not for long. She had other duties, and the first minutes of the day could not for her be more profitably employed than in harrying the servants.

At nine the gong sounded for prayers. The curate entered the room with his eyes still heavy with sleep. The ceremony was brief and, immediately afterwards, breakfast was served.

"I wonder where Frank is," remarked Mrs. Bygrave. "You really must speak to him, Samuel, his absence from prayers is such a bad example for the servants."

"I think I hear his voice," remarked her husband.

He was right. A moment later Dalton came into view striding briskly up the drive with a towel slung round his shoulders while he trolled the words of "Who will o'er the downs so free". He seemed as fresh as the morning. A minute later he was in the room apologising for his absence from prayers, dilating on the delights of his bath and recommending the curate to follow his example.

Rawlins interrupted his flow of chatter.

"I envy you, Mr. Dalton," he said. "But the fact is my medical adviser has warned me that cold baths would be dangerous to my health."

"Oh, that's the dictum of some old town fossil who is afraid to go in for them himself," replied Frank airily. "Perhaps, though, you could hardly go in for an open-

air dip at Graysbourne. There's hardly water enough for two of us, and the sight of a priest paddling in a brook in the hope of finding a pool deep enough to cover him is not exactly consonant with clerical dignity."

The rector blew his nose with portentous solemnity before commencing in a tone of grave reproof: "Frank, my boy, I have noticed of late in your conversation a tendency to sneer at the cloth I—er—wear." He cracked an egg. "You must—er—combat it, fight against it"—he got rid of the upper shell of his egg. "It is not the conduct I should have expected of you"—he lifted a spoonful of the egg to his lips—"of any gentleman"—the egg disappeared in his mouth—"puh—ph—st—damnation!"

"My dear sir!" remarked the curate.

"The dignity of the cloth," said Dalton musingly.

"The egg was stale," said the rector with a wry face.

"Try a draught of coffee," advised Dalton without troubling to restrain his merriment.

The rector followed his advice, and feeling better awoke to the necessity of an apology. "There are some occasions when the old Adam gets the better of us all," he remarked sententiously. "I owe you an apology, my dear," he said to his wife, "for momentarily forgetting myself."

"I am glad," she replied, "that none of the servants were in the room."

The lecture the rector had meditated had however come to an untimely end, and Mrs. Bygrave directed the conversation into a fresh channel.

"You will read this morning, I suppose, Frank?"

"Don't you think it is a little too fine," he replied diplomatically. "Suppose, instead, I were to go and offer my services to old Ryeland for a day's haymaking. I wonder how much he would give me."

"He would probably require a premium," interjected the curate.

“Why don’t you all come down and picnic in the hayfield,” continued Dalton, unheeding the remark. “It would be quite an old time idyll. The honest labourers, the jolly farmer and his buxom wife and daughters, the venerable priest and his wife, the Lady Bountiful, to accept the homage of all. Quite an ideal picture, isn’t it?”

The idea found favour with Mrs. Bygrave, and when half an hour later Dalton clad in his flannels set out to offer his services as he had suggested, he was entrusted with a message to say that the party from the rectory would be glad if they might be allowed to drink tea with Mr. and Mrs. Ryeland in the hayfield.

“Help yoursen, my lads, help yoursen. The cask’s no tilted yet,” said the farmer cheerily, and the men draining a glass in turn, bent once more to their toil. Ryeland had been at work all day, leading his men with right good will. If he expected them to work hard, he did not shirk the toil himself. And the day had been a good day for work, full of sunshine and with a brisk breeze to temper the heat. But as the afternoon wore away the men seemed to become fagged, the women grew pale beneath the grime on their brows. On the horizon, stretching round from east to west, had risen a dark bank of cloud. The farmer watched its menace with disquietude. The carts had returned for a fresh load. He checked the workers for a moment.

“Stay, my lads. D’ye see yon cloud? It means rain, and may-be the break-up of this fine spell. Are you willing to see the end of the hay-harvest to-night? It means a bit extra for all of you on Saturday night, you know, if we get it up before the rain comes.”

“We-uns ’ull do it if so be we do-unt drop,” said Grove doggedly. He had been working steadily from early morning, never tiring, the only effect upon him being that each hour the colour deepened on his cheek.

“Ay, measter, we ’ull stick to it, never fear,” chorussed the other men.

Richard Ryeland stepped across to where his daughter was standing. “Take a boy with you, Ruth, and bring us out some tea for the women. That’ll freshen ’em up more than the beer.”

Ruth sped on the errand, and Dalton watched her. He had been in the field all day, for the farmer had not hesitated to accept the services laughingly offered. He had enlivened the toil with his laughter and jokes, and made the field a playground even while he laboured with the best of them. It was a new experience, and he enjoyed it. His hands had hardened. He had felt, when the beads of perspiration had burst out upon his brow and he had swept them away with the back of his hand, as the other men did, that it was good to labour.

At mid-day Ruth Ryeland had made her appearance on the scene, white-robed, with dainty hat. When he caught sight of her face Dalton experienced that youthful attraction to the beautiful which makes the mind of youth as eager to receive an impression as a film of oxidised silver.

“My daughter, Mr. Dalton,” the farmer had said bluntly.

Dalton, anxious to make her acquaintance, had offered to assist her as she waited on her father and brother and filled the mugs of the labourers, but Ryeland would not hear of his doing so. After the hasty meal the girl had gone again, and throughout the afternoon Dalton found himself watching for her return. “It seems as if Amaryllis had come at last,” he told himself. Later in the afternoon the children, freed from their school tasks, found their way to the field and stood at the gate, a cluster of little sober faces, fearing to enter without invitation. The farmer had called to them, and throwing an armful of hay amongst them bade them romp as they pleased. Then Ruth Ryeland had re-

turned and had joined the children in their game. Finally the party from the rectory made its appearance, much to the amazement of the labourers, who exercised their imaginations in guessing the contents of the baskets with which the gardener and the two maid servants were laden.

"Tell us where we shall be out of the way, Ryeland," said the rector. "In this climate of ours we could not resist so inviting an occasion for a picnic."

"I've just sent for some tea for our people," said the farmer, "to freshen them up. There's nothing like it."

"How very thoughtful of you," remarked Mrs. Bygrave. "Perhaps you will allow us to wait upon them first and then perhaps you can spare time to join us in a cup."

"Thank ye, kindly," replied the farmer; "I'll be pleased, I'm sure, though tea is not much in my line." The little attention tickled his vanity.

Ruth appearing at the moment with two large cans of tea, the villagers had the novel experience of being waited upon by their "betters". Not that they enjoyed their experience, though they did not hesitate to swallow as much of the cake from the well-packed baskets brought from the rectory as they could obtain without appearing too greedy. They hurried over the meal under pretence of getting their work finished, but really in order to get away from the officious condescension of the ministering battalion. Dalton enjoyed the impromptu tea party. He had looked after the requirements of the youthful brigade, and being seconded by the farmer's daughter, he had at last found an opportunity of addressing a few words to her. She had been too busy to make more than monosyllabic replies. He thought she was shy. But when they sat down to their own repast he found that his supposition was wrong. Dalton, determined to break down the girl's reserve, found a seat for her a little apart from the rest of the rectory party and threw

himself down at her side. The shadows were beginning to lengthen on the close-cut sward, the perfume of the hay hung more heavily on the air, the shouts of the children rang bell-like from the far end of the field, even the laden waggons creaked musically. Under such conditions, small wonder that reserve fell from their lips like the scales from the beech-buds at the touch of the first spring sun.

“A beautiful day.”

“Ah, yes!” Simple words, but meaning much from sweet lips.

He looked into her eyes so intently that she half turned her head with a blush. “Strange,” he said, “that I have never realised until this moment how any one may be a part of the day.”

“I don’t understand,” she replied, puzzled by the apparent aimlessness of his remark.

“I am afraid I cannot explain without paying you a compliment,” he answered, “and our acquaintance is hardly advanced enough for that as yet, is it?”

“That is surely unkind of you. Compliments are few and far between in this little valley of ours.”

“Are the majority of the inhabitants blind then?” he inquired with mock gravity.

“No,” she answered with equal seriousness. “Only limited in their words for the expression of their ideas.”

“But compliments need not necessarily be paid in words merely.”

“It really is too hot to argue, Mr. Dalton,” she responded lazily. “Can I give you another cup of tea?”

They fell into desultory conversation, telling each other a good deal of themselves, and Dalton was full of regrets when his companion informed him that she must be leaving him for her household duties. His eyes followed her from the field, and then he threw himself back on the hay to watch the sky. Though the clouds were rolling up steadily, overhead the sky was clear and bright,

The hay was delightfully soft. He shut his eyes for a moment. . . . When he opened them again the expanse of blue was nearly closed in by the gathering clouds. A waggon was drawn up beside him, and a voice called to him, "Sorry to wake you, Mr. Dalton, but I want your pillow for the rick." He sprang to his feet, and his couch, caught on the prongs of the forks, was tossed to the top of the hay cart. The sun was already low, glowing redly amongst the broken clouds on the horizon north of west. The whole of the party were gathered near the waggon, and amongst the children he noticed the child he had lifted over the stile a few mornings before.

The curate also noticed Lossie's presence, and a frown wrinkled his face for a moment before being chased away by a flickering smile.

"You will just manage to get done in time, Ryeland," said the rector. "We shall have a heavy storm soon."

"We have just about an hour to get ready, sir," replied the farmer, and turning to the men he bade them hurry.

The rector turned to the children. "Getting near bed time, my dears, eh?"

They were silent, biting the corners of their pinafores.

"You must thank Mr. Ryeland for allowing you to play in the hay." He turned to the farmer again. "We have all to thank you, Ryeland, for giving us this opportunity of enjoying together this—er—rural festival. We are all accustomed to meet in church for worship, but—eh, what, Mr. Rawlins?"

The curate had seen an opportunity of saying the word in season which should bear fruit in due course, and he did not hesitate about interrupting the rector. His voice was perfectly clear and even.

"All of us but one, sir. There is one here who I am told comes neither to Sunday school nor to church." He pointed to Lossie.

The girl was a match for him alone, but attacked thus unexpectedly, seeing her companions shrinking away from her as if she bore contagion about her, she lost her courage.

Mrs. Bygrave stepped forward and viewing the shrinking maiden through gold-rimmed pince-nez, nodded approvingly to the curate, she said, "Quite right, Mr. Rawlins, I am glad you mentioned the matter; it is quite time some one spoke seriously to this girl of Grove's."

Meanwhile the men and women had paused in their work and turned to look at what was going on. The children gazed open-eyed, open-mouthed at the offender, glad that they were not the subject of reproof. Philip Grove came round from the other side of the cart and caught sight of his daughter standing with drooping head like a blush rose torn from its stem.

"What's ee been a-doin' ov?" he asked. He could only guess from her attitude that she had been detected in some fault.

The curate took upon himself to reply. "The sins of the father shall be visited upon the children." His tongue wagged the phrase with sanctimonious relish.

"What ha' they been a-doin' to ee little-un?" said Philip. He had gathered that his daughter had committed no fault.

Lossie looked up, the tender note in her father's voice set free the tears prisoned in her eyes, and in a moment she would have sobbed out her story in his ears, but the curate stepped between the father and child.

"Philip Grove, I have already spoken to you of your evil ways. I spoke to you privately that you might not be shamed. I spoke to your daughter here privately for the same reason. From both of you I received nothing but sneers. Therefore I think it is my duty to warn you publicly that your sin may be brought home to you through the contempt of those whom you live

amongst." His voice had been calm at the commencement of the address, but as he continued it grew harsher in tone. "The way in which you are bringing up your daughter can only have one result. It will bring her to ruin, and on her downward path virtuous women will turn aside from her and the children will shrink from her as they shrank but a moment ago."

The cords of custom bound down Grove's wrath, but as he listened to this harangue their tension was tried sorely.

The rector caught a glimpse of his face and tried to temporise. "Dear me! Rawlins. Not quite as bad as that let us hope." He spoke to Grove. "Look here, my man, why don't you do as the others do? Come to church yourself and send your daughter to the Sunday school. It's a bad thing to let a girl grow up without a—without a moral cable."

"If I were Mr. Ryeland," chimed in Mrs. Byegrave shrilly, "I should think twice about giving work to an atheist. It is tempting Providence."

Philip seemed stunned beneath the combined assault. He turned to his daughter. "Lossie, child, come here." He made no other answer. The child sprang to meet him, but the curate laid his hand upon her arm to hold her back.

The cords of custom burst and liberated the man. Grove caught hold of the curate and hurled him away. Lossie was home at last on his breast, her bosom heaving with childish turbulence. Grove found speech and rolled out a long curse which was caught up and repeated in a distant peal of thunder. But Grove took no heed. He fronted his enemy, clasping his daughter to him with his left hand while he raised his right in menace.

"D'ye think I be carin' vor any ov you. Youm better take heed or mebbe I shall be doin' ee zome 'urt. Why can't ee let us bide? We-uns ain't done nowt to you."

“But, my good man,” said the rector, “we are only thinking of your welfare——”

“Then I do-unt want it,” declared the labourer. “I do-unt want no truck wi’ thee Christianity and thee Church vor I knows what youm be gettin’ at. What youm wants to do is to come awver my little-un wi’ thee vine words an’ prayin’, to teach her to look up to ee and down on her veyther. Zarvants o’ God you calls thee-selves”—a light that was almost madness flashed in the man’s eyes. He raised his hand as if he were a prophet invoking the storm—“Zarvants o’ God! Whur be thee Measter? Why do-unt ee call on Un to strike I dead vor ee. I’ve hearn tell as ’ow ye believes as Ee ’olds the starm in the ’ollow of ’Uns hand. Listen to Un!”

A nearer peal of thunder drowned his laughter as he gazed upon the shrinking clerics. But he did not stir his attitude until it had ceased. Then he laughed again scornfully and turned again to the curate.

“Zeems to me, paazon,” he said sardonically, “that either your God ben’t a stirrin’, or else the starm’s broke loose an’ took the bit atween his teeth. I’ud be off whoam if I were ee. The thunderbolt might happen fall on the wrong party.”

He went to the heads of the horses and led them towards the gate. The thunder growled afresh and the group broke up and its members scattered like dead leaves caught in a wind eddy.

CHAPTER VI

THERE was need for hurry. A vast hand seemed to be at work rolling up the heavy masses of cloud from the horizon to the zenith. Here and there were still remaining patches of open sky through which streamed a light that made the depths luminous as with the reflection of a thousand corpse-candles. Sickly greens, heavy greys, ghast yellows, intermingled quiveringly, soon to give birth to tenser tones in vivid flashes.

Philip Grove at the head of the labourers hastened to get the cloths over the newly made ricks before the coming of the rain. He only laughed at the fear expressed in the faces of his companions. He did not fear the storm. He had no enmity with nature.

Frank Dalton found himself at the farmhouse, standing at one of the long windows, with Ruth Ryeland beside him, watching the gathering clouds. He had a dim remembrance of following her with a burden of broken meats, thinking that somehow his presence might protect her. As they stood side by side they spoke no word. The silence deepened. The thunders suspended the war note of their approach; the leaves drooped on the trees, unstirred by a breath of air. A door slammed somewhere in the house and the noise echoed with startling force through the passages. Still from the west shot up the weird yellow glare reflected luridly from the leaden canopy of the sky.

Of a sudden the light failed. The hand invisible had dropped the corner of the curtain. The storm had walled in the valley from the world. The silence deepened until it seemed to hold even the breath cap-

tive. When he felt he could bear the stillness no longer Dalton heard his companion move. The rustle of her dress was continued, the leaves caught the sound and repeated it until it was lost in the thrill which accompanies the near passage of the electric fluid. Crash followed the thunder, but before earth had time to toss the echo back to heaven the air thrilled with another discharge. No pause, the sky was drawn to earth by fine cords of fire, the sky broke from the earth and the riven cords recoiled in the valleys amongst the clouds and the hollows of the hills. Silence had been conquered at last and the elements lifted their voices in triumph. Darkness was defeated and every solid particle afloat in the air threw a shadow on the sea of electricity. Cloud whirled against cloud in wild gyration, cloud whirled against earth, was shattered, reformed. Still no pause until, with one supreme effort, lightnings streamed from every peak of hill and cloud and the thunders died of their own intensity; then the rain fell, sullenly at first in big hot drops which beat the petals from the roses, afterwards more tenderly and thickly.

With the falling of the rain the power of speech returned to youth and maiden.

"We have been silent long," he said.

"I—I could not have spoken," she answered, "but I was glad I was not alone."

"Do you know," he replied, "that while it lasted, I had all sorts of wild imaginings. At one time I half fancied that you had been spirited away. I was looking for your face in the darkness and for one moment I could have sworn you had gone. Then I took your hand."

Ruth looked down. If there had been light enough, Dalton would have observed a flush stealing upward from her throat and renewing the bloom in her cheeks.

"I—I did not notice it before. I was afraid," she faltered.

"Afraid?" he questioned. "Oh, no. You did not tremble though your fingers were cold."

"I was afraid," she repeated. "I thought perhaps that God—that Philip Grove—that it was in response to his wild defiance——" She shuddered slightly.

Dalton laughed lightly. "Don't you think you are crediting the Almighty with very human feelings by supposing that He would make use of a thunderstorm to avenge Himself for an affront wrung from a man by the persecution of a creature like that d—d intermeddling curate."

"Your language is emphatic, Mr. Dalton."

"I beg your pardon, Miss Ryeland."

"Please don't. You see, all the strength of language here is reserved for application to the labourer. It is refreshing to hear a reversal of the usual application of the epithet."

"Then I'll damn the curate continually," said Dalton.

Ruth laughed. She was recovering her spirits rapidly. "Not out of compliment to me, Mr. Dalton, or I shall begin to believe that he is a martyr too."

"There is little of the martyr about him so far as I can see," said Dalton.

"No," replied the girl slowly, "though he seems to me to be something of a fanatic. I didn't like his manner this evening, I am afraid it means trouble for Grove and Lossie.

"But surely," said Dalton, "Rawlins can do nothing to hurt him?"

"I am not so sure about that," she answered. "You have not lived for long in this village or you would have seen how the men and women can be cajoled into avoidance of an obnoxious person, or how pressure can be brought to bear upon his employer to get rid of him."

"But surely Mr. Ryeland would stand up for so capable a man as Grove?" asked Dalton in astonishment.

"What can my father do," replied the girl, "if the squire demands his dismissal? He cannot afford to offend his landlord, or the next time he wanted some improvement or other he would not get it. No, I'm afraid that Grove was unwise to make an open enemy of the curate."

"Well, anyway, if I can do anything to help him you may count upon me," said Dalton earnestly. "Anyhow, it is no use worrying ourselves about the matter now. If Rawlins——"

A loud, bluff voice broke in upon their conversation. "Hallo! That you, Ruth? And you, Mr. Dalton?" The voice was the farmer's.

"Here we are, Mr. Ryeland," replied Dalton. "We have been watching the storm from the window. It was a terror while it lasted."

"Pretty sharp," said the farmer. "We only just had time to get the cloths over the ricks before the rain fell."

"You did manage to do so?"

"Aye, though the men were afeard to work alongside Phil Grove after what he had said to the rector. They thought the storm had come for him, and weren't quite certain whether two or three of them would not be taken to keep him company."

"I suppose no one was hurt?" asked Ruth.

"Not to my knowledge," he replied.

"Cattle all right?" asked Dalton, assuming a fictitious interest in the subject.

"I'm just going to have a stroll round before supper to see if everything is safe and sound," replied Ryeland. "Maybe you would like to stroll round with me and come back to supper. I suppose you have asked him, Ruth?"

Ruth seconded the invitation, and Dalton accompanied his host on his round and echoed his expressions of delight at finding the beasts and the sheep unscathed.

An hour later they returned to the farm to find supper awaiting them, and Dalton rejoiced in the discovery that the easy life of the farmhouse differed vastly from the stiff formality of the rectory.

Everyone was at their brightest. Spirits kept in check during the storm were on the rebound and leaped high. Only the mother would have given pause to the mirth and have bidden the jesters think and be thankful for life uninjured. Perhaps hers had been a keener fear than that of the rest of them—not a personal fear merely—but keen enough to destroy the elasticity of the mind to some extent so that the rebound was faint.

“My mother is unselfish,” whispered Ruth to her guest, who had found a seat at her side, “and unselfishness is so rare nowadays that people don’t understand it.”

“I don’t,” declared Dalton, “but I should like to learn.”

“You are mocking me,” the girl answered with a pout.

“That is very unselfish of me, then,” he answered, “for nothing could be more distasteful to me than to give you pain.”

She turned from him with a smile. “Father, some more beef for Mr. Dalton, he is ashamed to confess how hungry he is.”

“Well, I think he has earned his supper. I never knew that you townsmen could work so hard.”

Dalton turned again to the girl. “Do you know that when I was dreaming this evening——”

Pure fun sparkled in her eyes. “Mother, Mr. Dalton is just telling me that when he was asleep on the hay this evening he was dreaming of a great jug of beer.”

Mrs. Ryeland passed the jug and Dalton resigned himself to the general conversation. But his eyes were continually upon the farmer’s daughter, and when the

meats had been removed he made more than one attempt to make the conversation personal. He succeeded at last.

"Really," he said, "I had no idea that farm life could be so idyllic."

The picture warranted the remark. Half a dozen candles in silver candlesticks shone upon a heaped basket of strawberries and a great dish of cream. On the side-board the half of a cheese flanked by brown crusted loaves stood invitingly close together. Two vases of simple shape, one filled with roses, the other supporting a long trail of purple clematis, added a further touch of colour to the table. Furniture and wainscotting were of dark oak, polished with age and much rubbing. The windows were wide open and the light just revealed the soft flush on the petals of the cluster of white roses stretching their heads in a vain endeavour to creep inside the casement. The scene was more homelike than any Dalton had hitherto known. It compared so favourably with the dull sobriety of his own home, unblessed for years by a mother's presence, that he felt a sudden heart hunger. He spoke of his feelings to Ruth.

Her eyes showed a ready sympathy. Presently the farmer nodded over his pipe, his son had left the room, his wife's head drooped over her knitting.

The two learned much of each other in the half hour which followed. He told her of his quarrels with his father, of the delights of the 'varsity life he had been compelled to resign for a time. She sketched for him her own uneventful existence, spoke of the family life and supplemented the story with anecdotes of the girls' school at the county town she had attended. He learned too that she had a brother in London who was in the way to become a rich man through marriage with a cousin who was the sole heir of Mrs. Ryeland's brother, into whose business the younger Ryeland had been placed to make his own way in life.

As he walked home to the rectory Dalton was conscious of a new sensation. Something had entered into his life that had not been there before, something as fair and fleeting as the faint gleam which flickered now and again in the clear sky over the brow of the hill. For the first time in his life he had done a day's work. Perhaps it was this which made the young life surge in his veins. He had heard of a new birth often enough, now he seemed to experience it. The Frank Dalton of his newly realised self was altogether a different being to the Frank Dalton of yesterday. He came as he mused to the plank which crossed the brook at the bottom of the valley. The water-course was full, the stream rushing tumultuously, only faint foam flecks showing where lay the big stones which that morning had barred the feeble current. "My life was empty as the waterway this morning, and this evening it is as full. Why is it?" he questioned. The night gave him no answer, for his ear was not attuned to the voices of the night. Could he but have understood he would have heard the waters murmur his question to the meadowsweet, and the meadowsweet breathe a love story to the breeze.

CHAPTER VII

AN echo of the thunderstorm which had stricken Graysbourne was heard at the breakfast table of the rectory on the following morning. The lightning had found a victim amongst the villagers, and one of the families lacked a breadwinner.

"Destiny," remarked Dalton when the news was told.

"The finger of God," remarked the rector reprovingly.

"Jonas Kent," said the curate, "was one of those upon whom Grove's evil influence was most apparent. His attendance at church was irregular, and I understand he was on his way to the public-house when he was taken. Without warning, without the consolations of the Church——"

"It is a lesson we should each one of us take to heart," said the rector. "Some more coffee if I may trouble you, my dear, and I will take another kidney, Rawlins, if you please."

"I will go immediately after breakfast and call on the widow," remarked the curate, "unless of course you would prefer to do so yourself."

"I shall be glad if you will, Rawlins. Very glad. I suppose, my dear," he turned to his wife, "you are quite unable to call. A woman's sympathy is so very different to a mere man's."

"Really, Samuel, I am surprised at your suggesting such a thing," replied Mrs. Bygrave with severity. "My nerves have not yet recovered from the effects of last night's storm, and to go down to one of those cottages amongst half a dozen squalling brats would be the last straw."

"It was indeed thoughtless of me," remarked the rector meekly.

The curate turned the conversation by reverting to an earlier line of thought. "I sincerely hope," he said, "that this sad occurrence will prove an effectual warning to Grove."

The smug self-sufficiency of the remark roused Dalton to an irritable reply. "Why the deuce can't you let the man alone, Mr. Rawlins. His resentment at your interference with him is absolutely justifiable. Any man with ordinary self-respect would act in a precisely similar manner."

A dull red spot glowed for an instant in the curate's cheek before he answered maliciously: "I can quite understand, Mr. Dalton, that your sympathies are entirely with the unregenerate."

"Well? And is not that where yours should be if your religion is of any practical value?" demanded Frank.

"There is a difference between our sympathies," said the curate. "Mine are with the sinner. I should judge yours to be more particularly with the sin."

Dalton was thoroughly angered by the calm tone of superiority assumed by the curate. "Call yourselves Christians," he asked with an expressive sweep of the arm which precipitated the cream ewer into the toast-rack, "and seek to exemplify the teachings of Christ by hounding down a defenceless man by the meanest ingenuities that little minds can devise——"

Three pairs of hands were upraised at the outburst, three pairs of eyebrows arched to meet the expressive wrinkles which formed in three foreheads, three tongues were for a moment speechless. The curate was the first to recover his speech.

"Stop, Mr. Dalton," he cried. "I cannot hear the faith I revere attacked in this way. I cannot allow your insult to my spiritual superior"—he bowed to the rector—"to pass unchallenged."

“No,” interrupted the rector, “I am afraid, Frank, you are too prone to forget the respect which is due to the cloth.”

“Oh, damn the cloth!” said Frank impatiently.

“Mr. Dalton!” The exclamation was Mrs. Bygrave’s. That good lady rose with exaggerated stateliness, casting one lingering glance at the pool of cream from which a slow-moving stream had almost gained the brink of the table and threatened every moment to fall in a snowy cascade upon the crimson carpet. The thought of her dignity struggled with the thought of possible irreparable damage to the carpet. Dignity triumphed. Mrs. Bygrave, quite speechless, pointed to the cream and swept out of the room.

There followed a wordy battle. The rector weighed out pompous periods of solemn advice. The curate sneered at unformed opinions and more than hinted at the course of licence which had produced so depraved a mind as that of his opponent. Dalton answered sneer for sneer. Calmly advised the rector to study the New Testament, and expressed the opinion that such a course of study would be useless to the curate, as he was congenitally incapable of understanding the sacred volume. Finally the clerical forces vacated the field with Dalton’s final request, “God preserve me from such sky-pilots,” ringing in their ears.

It was not until they had departed that Dalton awoke to the folly he had been guilty of in championing Grove in this fashion. Besides, it would be quite likely that the rector would no longer care to entertain in his house any one who was so ready to set him and his authority at defiance, and Dalton had no wish to leave the village to which a few weeks previously he had deemed himself exiled. He soon persuaded himself that his words had been stronger than the occasion warranted, and before the luncheon bell rang he had apologised individually to the three aggrieved parties.

Mrs. Bygrave had relented rapidly, for the carpet had sustained little damage. The rector had accepted the apology more stiffly, with the remark that on no account would he overlook such conduct a second time. The Reverend Robert Rawlins pardoned him with an effusive charity, which made Dalton leave his presence hastily with an ejaculation on his lips which might have been more fitly applied to a butcher.

Nevertheless his aim was attained, and for many days he was particularly careful to avoid giving offence. Indeed, he would have found it hard to say anything offensive to any one during the next few weeks so pleasant were they to him. The summer days were golden days and they sped rapidly. And not for him only.

For Ruth Ryeland the days were equally golden. The acquaintance made in the hayfield and cemented into friendship by the storm bade fair to ripen into something warmer than friendship. They met daily. Sometimes at the farmhouse, more often in the fields, on three or four occasions at Grove's cottage, so that they might discuss what steps should be taken for the labourer's protection if any overt steps should be taken against him.

Ruth was on her way to one such appointment when she came to a sudden pause. "It is quite time Frank and I thought of something," she said aloud. It was the sound of his name, dropping so easily from her own lips that was responsible for the sudden halt. She found herself face to face with another problem.

"Why did I call him Frank?" she asked of herself, and blushed to think of the answer.

"He is nothing to me," she told herself half angrily, and blushed again at the easy fall of the prenominal. "How stupid of me, I am nothing to him." Again the mounting blood gave the assertion the lie, yet there was no one to see but the wise daisies, the chaste daisies on whose white cheeks the mere kiss of the sun left a crimson stain for ever.

“What am I to him?” There was more force in the interrogative. “What could I be to him?” Here at last was a question to which an answer might be given.

Side by side, clearly printed on the pages of her mind, stood assertion and counter-assertion.

“You might win his love.”

“Folly! He is but amusing himself.”

“Be his helper and guide on the rough pathway of life.”

“And stumble yourself on the way.”

“A lamp to his feet in the dark places.”

“And fail for lack of oil when the gloom is deepest.”

“To be near him always, a solace in affliction, a comforter in time of despair. To rejoice in his victories and message hope to him in his failures.”

“Ah! If I might!”

Here was the end of the page, a lesson much conned by maidens, and all its philosophy, the philosophy of the pure in heart, summed up in the shivering cadence of the sigh with which it closed.

Ruth turned the page.

“Handed, together you may fare forth on the path of life.”

“For how long?”

“His will be the conflict.”

“If he should grow weary?”

“Love shall be the buckler.”

“But if the buckler break?”

Finis was written at last. Maiden musings must needs end with the interrogative, which only matrons can answer and they dare not lest their lords be offended.

Ruth intent on her reverie had not noticed an approaching figure. She had paused at the stile where she had met Dalton before, and was looking for him on the path by which he usually approached. A voice spoke to her from behind, recalling her questioning spirit from cloudland. It was not *his* voice.

“Good morning, Miss Ryeland,” the curate smiled his sweetest, bowed a butterfly bow, hovered doubtfully a moment, then decided to rest on the stile.

He had chanced upon a maiden dreaming, at a stile where bushes arched over from the coppice, dreaming with the rustle of the corn to voice the dream and the purple of the succory and the crimson of the poppies to clothe it. The stain of the poppies had passed to the maiden’s cheek at sight of him. There was warrant for the conclusion that he was the subject of the dream.

Surely! Of course it was very ridiculous that a mere farmer’s daughter should think of him in that way, but to Rawlins it seemed very natural that he should have inspired the dream. Ruth had been much in his thoughts, what more natural then that he should have been enshrined in hers. He could understand it. His appearance—the pleasing exterior, the glow in the windows of the soul from the lamp within, with its well-woven wick of intellectuality fed by the sweet spiritual oils of grace—was quite sufficient to account for it. He could well understand how it was she came to dream of him, but nevertheless could not help but feel flattered. It might be absurd, farcical even, for a mere farmer’s daughter to dream of him, the priest, secure in his position, fenced about with the sanctity of his vocation, but after all it was quite natural for her to do so. He was almost ready to pity her for her dream, yet there was no reason why he should destroy it. It would be quite sufficient for him to feign ignorance regarding what was clearly recognisable to him—besides, she was undoubtedly fair. The opportunity of a few minutes’ pleasant conversation with his prettiest parishioner was not to be thrown away. He expressed his friendliness in the emphasis he put into the homely phrases with which he opened the conversation.

“How *do* you do, Miss Ryeland? Very well? How *glad* I am to hear it. Such a *beautiful* morning, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

Ruth's monosyllabic reply left him stranded. He felt a little annoyed at not being able to rise above the commonplace. He looked about him for material for further remarks, and only succeeded in grasping impressions vaguely.

“The trees,” he faltered, “are so green.”

“They are,” replied Ruth solemnly.

“The—corn is so—yellow.”

“It is.”

“And with the blue sky”—desperately this—“makes a perfect setting for—er—er.”

He had not intended to drift into compliment, but in his difficulty he had reached the very verge of one. He finished the sentence with an unintelligible mutter and hastily followed it with a question which was purely noncommittal.

“May I ask which way you are going, Miss Ryeland?”

He expected some half-equivocal reply of “Nowhere,” some explanation of how tempted by the beauty of the morning she had strolled out to dream in the very garden of dreams, the rustling ripening corn. Then he would have been able to reprove her gently for wasted time and——

Ruth answered him briskly, “I was just going to see Lossie Grove”.

There rushed upon the curate the memory of that bewildering afternoon when he had been so flouted by the two girls that he had fled from their presence. “What!” he gasped, “you still continue your acquaintance with the members of that depraved family. Surely your parents do not know—would not approve of your visit?”

“Everyone is not so bigoted as yourself, Mr. Rawlins,” replied Ruth with asperity.

“You evade my question,” said the curate with his

most pastoral manner. "I must look into this matter. Of course, if your parents desire you to aid these Groves in their Sabbath-breaking I can only regret the fact, but it is my bounden duty to make them aware of your frequent visits to the man's cottage."

Ruth blushed. She suddenly realised that her father would not view with approval the friendship with the labourer's daughter, nor—more particularly—the conferences in which Dalton had taken part.

The curate noted the blush and saw that he was on the right track. "I am afraid that the conduct of those unhappy people will lead me into taking stern measures towards them. I am rapidly coming to the conclusion that they should not be permitted to remain in the village."

So what she had feared was after all to come to pass. Lossie was to be turned out of her home, cast adrift into a horribly cold world to toil and strive and—sink. She could see before her the child's face pleading to remain. A wistful weary face, and at thought of it Ruth determined to make one more attempt to turn the curate from his purpose. "I have not pleaded yet," she thought, "I will humble myself." She moved nearer to the dapper figure blocking the path.

"Mr. Rawlins," she said beseechingly, "let me beg of you not to hunt down the Groves"—the gathering cloud on the curate's brow warned her that her words were ill-chosen. "No, I don't mean that. What I want to ask you is to have just a little more patience. You don't know all the circumstances of Grove's life or you would understand that he must feel very bitter against——"

"I am aware of all the circumstances to which you allude," said the curate.

His tone gave Ruth no hope. How could she plead with this fanatic. She might tell him of the love she bore the child. That perhaps might touch his heart.

"I have no sister, Mr. Rawlins, and—Lossie Grove has been nearly one to me. You would not part sisters, surely?"

The poppy stain had left her brow and now only the thought shadows relieved the pallor of her cheeks. Her eyes were dim but the mists veiling them did not hide their beauty. She leaned toward the curate and placed her hand upon his arm beseechingly. She tried to meet his glance but despite herself her eyelids drooped. She was very near to him, and the fragrance of her hair swept away the bonds of sacerdotalism. After all, the Reverend Robert Rawlins was a man. Ruth lifted her eyes again. Their glances met. Ruth shrank back appalled, ashamed.

Rawlins had become conscious while Ruth pleaded that there was more beauty in the world than he had been cognisant of before. For the first time in his life he forgot himself in the presence of a fair face and graceful figure. While she had been striving to awaken his interest in her girl friend he had found himself gloating on the beauty of her columned throat and picturing to himself, without self-rebuke, the beauty of the bosom swelling with imprisoned sobs beneath the soft white fabric which covered it. His feelings were expressed in his glance. The maiden had expected to see the grey-green eyes softened with sympathy. Instead, inexperienced as she was, she knew instinctively that the only fire she had succeeded in awakening was the torchlight of lust.

She felt ashamed. To her shame succeeded anger. Still she knew not what to say. She turned from him. He laid his hand on her arm to detain her. She suddenly remembered that by no chance would any one be near. He took her hand in his and was striving to look into her eyes. She shuddered. He thought she was trembling with delight. His heart grew stronger, his scruples were naught. After all, what would one kiss matter?

Women are rarely at a loss for an expedient on such occasions. "See, here comes madam," she said, using the village courtesy title for the rector's wife.

The curate sprang yards. Ruth ran lightly along the path and was speedily out of sight in the wood. He only became aware of the ruse when it was too late to arrest the girl's flight, and then surging up in an overwhelming wave came the floodtide of shame.

What diabolic power had forced him into so false a position? He ground his teeth together with the rage of the man who longs to find an outlet for his passion and sees none immediately available. He had thought he had inspired a passion in this fair parishioner and too late he had discovered that he had only inspired contempt. He was the type of man to whom contempt is the keenest of darts, and he had seen it in Ruth's eyes, in the curve of her lips, in her repellent gesture. He was angry with her for having caused him to betray himself into so unbecoming a situation. He drew a deeper line in his forehead to match his ill-arched brow, and strode away pondering how best he could set himself right. His path was marked by the broken stems of the taller ears of wheat, by the scattered poppy petals in his path, stricken by the hazel wand he had torn from the hedge and wielded remorselessly as he passed along. He found a savage delight in breaking the cornstalks; even so would he break the pride of the girl who had scorned his caress.

CHAPTER VIII

THE days that passed so rapidly for Ruth and for Dalton dragged themselves by for the curate. Slowly he became aware of what was happening but he made no sign. He kept his ears and his eyes open and watched. It was torture to him to know that day by day Dalton was meeting the girl, yet he managed to possess his soul with patience until the time should arrive for him to put an end to it. Not until the harvest was done and the woodlands were bright with autumnal tints did he move in the matter. Then at last came the opportunity for which he had been waiting. The squire had returned to the hall for the shooting, and meeting him one day at the rectory Rawlins had managed to hint that Grove was wont to vary his diet by means of an occasional raid on the squire's coverts. He had been so careful in making the suggestion that he was convinced that no one would suspect that the charge emanated from him. But it was sufficient to send the squire to his tenant with the request that the latter should obtain another carter in Grove's place.

He followed up his stroke with a second which was still more effective. He mentioned to the rector all he had ascertained regarding Dalton's assignations with Ruth at Grove's cottage, and managed to let his superior have ocular demonstration of such a meeting.

As the result, one bright October day when Richard Ryeland was sitting alone before the fire after his mid-day meal he was astounded at seeing his rector coming across the fields towards his house.

"Wonder what he wants, some blessed subscription,

I suppose," grumbled the farmer; and he ran over in his mind his customary string of excuses for refusing to entertain any such appeal. When, however, after Mr. Byegrave had been announced and the preliminaries of conversation had been successfully negotiated, the farmer was surprised to find that his visitor seemed to find some difficulty in opening the subject, whatever it was, which had brought him to the farm.

"I—ah—I wished particularly—to—ah—speak to you, Ryeland, about—ah——" Then the rector paused.

"Yes?" asked the farmer, not too encouragingly, buttoning up his pocket as he spoke.

"Ah—about a very delicate matter."

"Not cash this time, more about Grove, I expect," muttered the farmer.

The first part of the sentence did not reach Mr. Byegrave's ears, but he caught the name of Grove and it gave him the opening he sought.

"Yes, Grove has had something to do with the matter I wish to speak to you about, though only to a comparatively small extent. Unfortunately, I feel that I too am somewhat to blame, though quite unwittingly, I can assure you, and it is to make amends at the very earliest opportunity that I have come to open your eyes to what has been going on."

The farmer's eyes were opened to their widest. "What has Grove been up to now?" he questioned.

"Grove must have known of it and it was his duty to have enlightened you. It is sad to think that your daughter should act so as to make herself and her actions the theme of gossip in the village."

"My daughter? Are you meaning Ruth?" said the farmer.

"Your daughter Ruth," repeated the rector. "I believe you have on several occasions welcomed Mr. Frank Dalton to your house?"

"Oh!" ejaculated Ryeland, a light beginning to dawn

upon his bewilderment. "There isn't anything wrong about young Mr. Dalton, is there?"

The rector entered into a prolix and highly coloured account of the escapades which had led to Dalton's rustication supplemented by a great deal of material from imaginative sources. "Under these circumstances," he concluded, "I do not think it advisable that your daughter should be meeting this young man daily at Grove's cottage. For that reason I have thought it my duty to inform you of what has come to my knowledge."

"By the Lord," said Ryeland, "he shall marry the girl."

The rector coughed. "I am afraid, Ryeland," he said, "that my old friend Dalton has other views for his son. In fact, I happen to know that if Frank does not marry as his father desires he will not have a penny of his father's money."

"The young rascal," roared the farmer, as the thought of the advantages of the match for his daughter in wedding the son of the wealthy manufacturer disappeared. "What right had he to come sweethearting round my girl when he has nothing to offer her?"

"That is precisely my view," said the rector, "and for that reason I have already written to his father to remove him from my charge. At the same time I thought it best that you should know exactly how matters stand."

"Thank you kindly, sir," said Ryeland. "I'll look after my own, you may be sure."

"I know you will, Ryeland. There is only one other thing, and that is the part Grove appears to have played in the business."

"You may let me look after that too," said the farmer. "The fact is, I've already made up my mind to make a change."

"I think your decision is a wise one," said the rector gravely. "You know what the Bible says about the little leaven?"

“Make your mind easy,” replied the farmer. “Come Michaelmas and you may reckon on the village being shut of Philip Grove.”

The Reverend Samuel Bygrave departed, wagging his pow with the satisfied air with which he descended the pulpit stairs at the conclusion of one of his improving discourses. He felt that he had successfully performed a delicate task, and he made his way back to the rectory there to give an account to Mrs. Bygrave of what he had done, serenely unconscious that he had been a mere catspaw in the hands of the curate.

Meanwhile Ryeland, directly his spiritual adviser had departed, went in search of his daughter. He was not surprised at the information which had been given him for he had been keenly alive to the advantages of a match between his daughter and Dalton. If, however, there was likely to be family objections to it, he was not the sort of man to feel any qualms about sending a penniless suitor to the right about.

He wandered into the garden, and there he came upon as pretty a picture as anyone might wish to see—anyone, that is, save the father who had been given cause to believe that the suitor for an only daughter’s hand had merely an intention to sip the sweets before seeking a fresh flower.

Ruth in a long linen apron was seated on a bench beneath a silver birch with a basket of rosy-cheeked apples beside her. Ostensibly she was paring the apples and placing the quarters into the basin in her lap, but in reality her attention was much more fully occupied by her companion who lounged in a low folding chair almost at her feet. The westering sun glanced through the thinned foliage and threw tiny flecks of light on the maiden’s hair.

Ryeland hesitated to disturb them. The careless grace of the two awoke a sudden feeling that he was an intruder. They were so frankly at ease with each other that he knew intuitively that they had nothing to con-

ceal. "There an't much harm done as yet," he muttered as he strolled down the path towards them. They made no movement as he approached, but when he was quite near he plunged at once into the question which occupied his thoughts.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Dalton. We seem to have seen a goodish bit of you round about here of late."

Dalton looked up with surprise. There was a veiled challenge in the farmer's tone. "Quite true," he answered smiling. "You see, the companionship I get here is much more to my taste than that offered at the rectory."

Was it a reflection of the apples or a fleeting blush that passed over the girl's brow as she bent to the basket?

"May-be, my lad, may-be," replied the farmer going honestly to the point, "but have you ever considered whether it is as much to my taste?"

Dalton fired in a moment. "If I am not welcome, I'll go." He sprang to his feet as he spoke.

"Come, come," said Ryeland. "I'm not meaning anything unkindly. But may-hap you haven't given thought that my lass there might be learning to set store by your coming, and then away you go without another thought for her."

"Oh, father!" There was no mistaking the wave of colour on her forehead now for a reflection from the cheeks of the apples.

"Hush, Ruth. 'Tis for you I speak. I suppose Mr. Dalton has not told you of the girl in London who wears his ring on her finger."

"That's not true," quoth Dalton hotly.

"Come, young sir, I mean no offence," continued the elder man. "The rector has just now left my parlour. He came to tell me that your meetings with my girl were the talk of the village and he felt it his Christian duty to warn me that your father had other views for you than mating with a farmer's daughter."

“D——d old meddler,” said Dalton.

“And I come out here to ask her if any word had passed between you, and I find you at her feet. Don’t you think it is time for a father to speak?”

Ruth answered him softly, the flush still bright on her brow. “There was no need, father. No word that you or mother might not hear has ever passed between us.”

“And nothing meant?” asked Ryeland looking at Dalton who stood irresolute, one hand on the tree trunk.

“Nothing meant?” repeated Dalton slowly. Then he held himself up stiffly and faced the farmer. He was taken unprepared but he was nothing loth to accept the opportunity of speaking of the purpose which had been slowly forming itself during the past weeks in his mind. “Nothing meant? No. I cannot say that, Mr. Ryeland. There is one thing I do mean and that honestly, though I had hoped first to have had the opportunity of whispering what I wished to say in your daughter’s ear.” He sought Ruth with his eyes but hers were bent on the ground.

“What, lad?” interrupted Ryeland.

“Listen to me one moment,” said Dalton. “During the past few weeks, Mr. Ryeland, I have learned—that—that your daughter is very dear to me.” He felt that he was going too fast, but the impulse was too strong to be resisted. He turned to the girl. “Ruth, you must have seen what I felt. I have never spoken what is in my thoughts but surely you must have guessed?”

She said nothing but gave him one glance. It was as if he glanced into the depths of a soul unveiled for a moment. He continued more confidently:—

“I have reason for thinking that Ruth does not find my companionship ungrateful to her. So I ask you, Mr. Ryeland, to give me the same chance that you would give any other suitor for her hand, that you will treat me exactly as you would treat any other man who

honestly loved your daughter and would win her for his own."

"Aye, aye," said the farmer. "That's fair spoken enough and you mean all right. But you are both full young. You are going away, and if you wed against your father's wish what sort of home will you be able to take your wife to."

Dalton broke forth into protestations. Ryeland was more than half inclined to accept them, but the rector's warning rang in his ears. "No, no, I'll not have any engagement between you. When you're both a bit older there will be quite time enough to think about that."

"I'm going away but I shall return," said Dalton. "For the day or two I shall remain in Graysbourne you will not forbid Ruth to see me?"

The farmer scratched his head. "I've promised the rector," he remarked slowly, "as I'd put a stop to anything. I'm afraid that I must ask you not to call at the farm. But I'm not the man to shut a child of mine up in the house."

After all, matters might be arranged and he would not like any hasty action of his to stand in the way of his daughter's welfare. He held out his hand to Dalton and returned the young man's squeeze with heartiness. Then he turned on his heel. "Come, Ruth," he said.

"To-morrow morning at the stile by the beech copse," whispered Dalton.

She pursed her lips prettily with a half-frightened "yes".

He bent down. So they kissed.

"Come, my lass," repeated the farmer, his back still towards them.

Ruth ran past him to the house lest he should see and question her for the reason of her blushing. She sought her bedroom and straightway hid her face amongst the pillows lest she should herself see the reflection of those same bright shadows in her mirror and feel ashamed that so little a thing as a kiss could make her so happy.

CHAPTER IX

IN the fresh of the morning the two met again.

There is a witchery in the broad-barred old-fashioned stile with its wooden bars worn smooth by contact with five or six generations of rustic lovers. The stile where Dalton met Ruth was perfect of its kind, an ideal village trysting-place. The hedge which flanked it on either side was broad and tall, and the briar bush to the left so swept out to the briar bush on the right that they who met there of necessity kept close to each other lest the thorns should tear them. On one side was a sloping pasture and on the other a narrow lane which lost itself within a very few yards in a coppice of beech. That lane, too, was a very charming place wherein to stroll. There unfolded the earliest violets in the spring, and even the daffodils did not disdain to deck the green turf with their golden tassels.

Here then they met before the sun had melted the pendant crystals on the grass blades, and while yet the mist curtains enfolded the valley.

“And you must go—to-day?” The maiden’s lips repeated the question which her heart knew truly could have only one answer.

A kiss answers many questions. On this occasion it could have been translated as an affirmative with the suffix “Alas!”

“And you will forget me?”

In reply protestations and, more re-assuring, another kiss. This time the kiss answered emphatically “Never”.

Children, perhaps, but it is good to be children sometimes.

Presently they got to more connected conversation.

"Sometimes I seem to have known you all my life," said Ruth, "at others I doubt whether you do really exist at all except in my imagination."

"My dear," said Frank, "you will never have cause to doubt the reality of my existence. You have come into my life even as I have come into yours. I could not conceive of life without you."

More kisses. . . . Then conversation began again.

"Why did you not tell me before that you were to leave to-day?"

"I did not know myself until last night, and, even had I known, I don't think I should have told you. The shadow of parting would have lain too heavily on our last hours. Indeed, I have been striving all night to forget that to-day I must say good-bye."

"This morning? Oh! Frank."

"Yes, sweetheart. In a few minutes."

More kisses fresh as the dew. . . . Dalton spoke again, buoyantly as became a lad parting from his sweetheart for the first time. "Yes, I must go this morning. Last night came the summons from home. I am to return to town at once, and I am to be provided with a desk in my father's office where, to quote his words, 'my education may be continued at less cost though with more rigour than at college'."

"Then you won't go back to Oxford? Oh! Frank, how sorry you must be."

"No, Oxford is now a memory merely. But don't you think I am going to be chained down to a desk all my life just to gratify the whim of Mr. Dalton, senior."

"But, Frank, he is your father."

"Ruth, if your father were to bid you marry anyone else in my absence——"

"That is different," she objected.

"Not at all," said he. "When I learned that old Bygrave had written to my father telling I don't know

what story of my doings here, I immediately followed up his epistle with one of my own, in which I gave a detailed account of what I had said to your father."

"Oh! Frank, how dared you?"

"I would dare anything for you, dear." So stereotyped an answer scarcely deserved the sweet repayment it received.

"That's not all, Ruth," continued Frank. "My father has written to tell me that if in six months he finds I have not given up what he calls my silly infatuation and am not prepared to enter into a formal engagement with the daughter of his partner all the prospective benefits which would accrue to me as his heir will be diverted to my brother."

Ruth was mute. The flush left her face and she drew away from his side. Frank looked at her in astonishment.

"Surely, Ruth, you would not let that make any difference to our love?"

The reproach stung her, but she did not draw any nearer. "I must not let you suffer," she said slowly. "I—can—forget."

He comprehended the sacrifice which was in her heart to make, and his own heart thrilled with joy. He drew her close to his side again.

"Ah, no, no, darling. You don't think that I could sacrifice you at the shrine of Mammon. Come, sweet-heart."

She did not accept the offered caress. With her hand she held him from her lips, as with a half sob she cried, "Stay, Frank. Let me think."

He, darkling, stood watching her, half in doubt lest he should have misread her intent. He watched her while the sobs struggling in the delicately moulded throat were forced back to be imprisoned in the rising bosom. And as he watched she looked up at him through her tears, and the sunlight of her smile flashed out and she

came to him and put her hands in his and kissed him on the eyes and on the lips, and said, "No, no, no. There is no gain if love be lost. It is more than life."

Children!

They spoke of the future. Of the fame and the fortune he would win for her. She listened while the sun rose and the mist in the valley broke into fleecy patches and moved here and there on the face of the fields. Hand in hand they stood, and talked while the mist was lifted from her home, from the rectory and, finally, from the cottages at the bottom of the slope. Then when the last white wreath was annihilated by the sun they, still hand in hand, looked each other bravely in the eyes and kissed once more and said good-bye, and so parted.

CHAPTER X

BESIDES securing Dalton's retirement from Graysbourne, the curate's diplomacy was soon to bear further fruit. The Groves were the sufferers, and the first hint of what was impending came to Lossie as she stood waiting at the garden wicket one evening and wondering what made her father so late. One of the villagers on his way home tossed a word to her as he passed.

"Good-night, my maidie. Thee veyther oon't be long. Summat wrong wi' th' varmer is keepin' un."

A cause for wonder this but no reason for anxiety. Perhaps Dobbin or Emperor was ailing, or perhaps one of the colts. It would be a nuisance if her father should have to return to the farm after supper and sit up all night in the stables.

Presently Philip came over the brow of the hill and, as she saw him, Lossie knew instinctively that something untoward had happened. Her father walked slowly, his head was bent and he stooped from the shoulders. "He must have had an accident with one of the horses," she told herself.

When twenty paces from his home Philip paused, lifted his head and looked steadfastly at the cottage. The borders gay with dahlias and Michaelmas daisies, one or two roses still abloom on the walls, the latticed window with the light from the fire within flickering on the diamond panes, the door open invitingly and framed in the doorway, Lossie—that was his home.

"Father, why be you waitin' there?"

Lossie's question awoke him from his reverie. He came on again and brushed past his daughter, for-

getting to give her the customary kiss. Lossie followed him in, hurt and wondering. Something serious must have happened to make him act so differently from his usual custom. He went directly to the arm-chair and, throwing himself down in it, sullenly covered his face with his hands.

"What be the matter, father?" asked Lossie anxiously.

Philip roused himself. "You an' Miss Ruth an' Measter Dalton an' the paazon an' th' zquire ha' done vor I atween you," he replied bitterly.

"What?" gasped Lossie at a loss to understand his meaning.

"Aye, I means it. Varmer ha' given I th' zack."

"It can't be true. It can't be true," cried the girl with a long-drawn breath which ended in a sob.

"It be true enow," said Philip. "Though I do-unt be zayin' it's thy vault little-un. 'Tweren't much use makin' vriends wi' them as is zot up above ee."

"But why," said Lossie, "should the farmer have turned on you 'cos Miss Ruth was friendly? 'Tisn't as if the friendship was of our seeking."

"That ben't everything," said Philip. "Th' varmer do think as 'ow Miss Ruth 'as been a sweetheartin' down here along o' Mr. Dalton. That's one thing. Then zquire, ee do zay as 'ow ee knaws as I been doin' a bit o' poachin'. It's them paazon volk been a tellin' lies about we-uns, I knaws. Dom th' 'ole brood ov 'em vor takin' away an' 'onest man's 'ome."

The spasm of rage passed, and Philip leaned back in his chair with a groan. "I'm to go Michaelmas day. He'll gie I a week to look round, but he'll vind another caater at Zizziter mop an' ee'll want th' cottage for un."

Lossie said nothing. The news seemed to be too incredible to be true. She waited upon Philip while he munched his bread and cheese and drank cup after cup of the weak tea she poured out for him, but not until his meal was finished did she question him further.

"Where are we going, father?" she asked timidly.

"'Ow zhould I know?" was the sad reply. "Them as poized my life and my veyther's afore me 'ull take care az I zhant zettle nowheres in this country. There, go ee to bed lass and do-unt ee vret. I 'ull just ha' a look in at the public an' zee if any of th' chaps knaws of anybody as wants a caater."

Philip Grove took his hat and went out into the night. A black mood was upon him, and it would have gone ill with any of his enemies had they happened to meet him on the bit of lonely road. But he met no one, and when he entered the taproom of the public-house his looks were so savage that the jests died on the lips of such men as were already gathered about the fire and the laughter gave place to sober gravity. The appearance of the wraith of a dead man could not have more effectually secured complete silence.

It was the voice of the village sot, the being who has usurped the place of the village natural, that eventually broke the spell. "What ha' coom to ee, Grove?" he asked with a vacuous grin of amiability. "Dom my eye, if thee do-unt look vit to change about with the old 'un."

"Hold thee row, Jim," was Philip's response. "Mis-sus, a quaat o' thee zix ale."

The occupants of the taproom stared. Six ale was a feast-day drink; none of them could afford so precious a beverage on ordinary occasions. The pot passed from mouth to mouth with varied comment. "Prime stuff, thick," "Warms the throttle vor zhure," and so forth.

Philip ordered another pot of the beer and, seating himself in the corner of the settle, fell to silence again. The oil lamp threw a dull yellow light on the lime-washed walls and the painted partition around the bar. Philip's eye roaming restlessly observed a grocer's gaudy almanac with an illustration entitled "The Squire". He rose and, conscious that everyone present was watching him, walked across the room and deliberately

spat upon the offending picture. Then he walked back to his seat.

The landlady, who stood at the bar entrance, bustled forward. "Drat ee! What made ee do that vor?" she asked as she dried the picture with her apron.

"Yon's what I'd be likin' to do vor all on 'em, zquires an' paazons an' all," replied Philip smiting the table with his clenched fist. "Dang 'em! Dang 'em all!"

Gradually the company increased. The news that Grove had to leave the village had passed from cottage to cottage and the gossips gathered to discuss the event. It was unusual for any one of their number to leave except for the workhouse or the graveyard, and all who entered the inn were keen upon hearing the reason for Philip's departure. But not until a third quart of ale loosened Grove's tongue did he satisfy their curiosity. By that time he had for audience the greater part of the male population of the village. He told them his story as simply as he had told it to his daughter, but at the conclusion, instead of burying his face in his hands, he stood erect clutching the mantle with his great corded fist so tightly that the outstanding sinews threw shadows on the flesh.

When he had finished a chorus of sympathy awakened, swelled and died away. It was rough-toned, perhaps, but heart-felt and kindly. The sympathisers were serfs, too, and to-morrow the iron might be hotted to sear their souls. Philip thanked them and relapsed into silence.

"I do zuppose," said one of the greybeards a little later, "that thee 'll be g'wain' to Zizziter mop to vind another job?"

"Noa," said Philip.

"What bist g'wain' to do then?" asked the speaker.

"I be g'wain' right away," Grove replied doggedly.

"I do think as 'ow I've 'ad enow of Gloucesterzhire."

A murmur of amazement passed round the room.

"Yes, zhure I be a g'wain' vurther avield. But that won't trouble no-one. Hi! missus. Zend us in aalf a

gallon o' the right stuff. Partin' be dry work vor zartin, an' t'wull be long avore we-uns meets here again."

"But what 'ull ee be a doin' wi' thee bits o' vurniture?" queried one of the party.

"Zhure, I 'ad never gied it a thought," said Philip. Then he turned to the landlady. "Zay, missus, what 'ull thee bid vor th' lot?"

"Do-unt ee be voolish, man," she replied. "Thee'll vind zome plaace to zettle in nigh enow vor th' varmer to zend thee sticks awver vor ee."

But Grove was beyond listening to advice however well intentioned. The beer he had drunk was beginning to take effect. "I be g'wain' right away. I ben't a g'wain' to be burdened wi' pots an' pans zo I be just a g'wain' to zell 'em vor what they 'ull vetch."

There was a chorus of dissuasion and warning but Philip was obdurate. He renewed his offer.

This time one man seemed inclined to take him at his word. "If thee'st made up thee mind," he said slowly, "I do think as my missus could do wi' zome o' thee sticks, zupposin they be cheap."

"I 'ull zell to th' highest bidder," said Grove. Then he turned to another man with a new idea. "Why zouldn't we-uns have an auction like? What dost say, Garge Hayward? 'Ull thee be th' zalesman? I vancy thee be th' zmartest man wi' thee tongue among us, an' as thy old 'ooman baint got nowt to throw away on vurniture, zin it's all gone on beer, it won't spoil th' bidding."

"Youm a zour tongue, Phil Grove, zour as varges," replied Hayward. "Natheless, I 'ull zell thee things vor ee if ee wants I to do zo. Come, missus, bring I a goose veather an' th' ink to help I make neighbour Grove make a vule o' hissen."

There were laughter and rough jokes while Grove catalogued his household gods for the use of the amateur auctioneer. There was no necessity for anyone to view the articles for each one present knew the

contents of his neighbour's cottage nearly as well as he knew his own. Some treated the whole matter as a jest, others agreed in whispers not to bid against each other for the articles they desired, while amongst them bustled the landlady, smiling, for never before except on the village feast day had she drawn so much of her strong ale. Presently Hayward called for silence, and the hum of conversation ceased. At the head of the white deal table marked with numberless circles where the beer jugs had rested stood the auctioneer. By his side, leaning against the mantel, stood Grove. The dull flickering light and the heavy pall of smoke from the numerous pipes made the faces of the circle of men about the table appear blurred to Philip.

"Zale's about to commence," cried Hayward rattling two glasses together.

"What about th' conditions o' zale?" asked a man at the end of the room. "It be usual to read 'em out virst."

"Zhut thee mouth, vat yud," replied the auctioneer with dignity. "Thee bist like a draught ox, all bellow an' no belly, vor I do know as thee hasn't a brass varden to thee name."

A roar of laughter followed the sally.

"Zhure," remarked one of the greybeards only a few months from the workhouse, "Garge 'ud a made a vine auction man if ee 'ud been put to it."

"Zilence in th' pig market," cried Hayward. "Vor the laast time, Grove, I axes ee if you be g'wain' to bide by th' zale?"

"I ben't one as 'ull go back on my spoken word," replied Philip. "Garge here 'ull put down on 'is paaper whatsomedever youm zay. Ee 'ull leave th' paper wi' th' missus an' youm 'ull bring her the money. When I leaves I 'ull bring her the key an' she 'ull 'and awver th' money an' youm can vetch the things away."

"The rest of the conditions o' zale are," said Hayward, "that every chap among ee who bids vor aught puts down th' price of a gallon, an' them as doesn't bide by their

bargain 'as 'is money consecrated for them as does, an' the more as breaks their bargains th' bettern I'm plazed."

"Zmart chap, Garge," commented the admiring grey-beard again, "reglar drowed away on a ditcher's job."

There was a bustle as the landlady collected the deposits from intending purchasers, and when it subsided Hayward plunged at once into the sale.

"Now, gentlemen all, th' virst article which I be bringing under your notice is th' valooable vour post bed carved in th' very vinest of oak, wi' veather bed to vit all covered wi' th' pruttyist pattern o' zacking youm ever zeed in your lives. In this ere bed," he continued, "the gentleman who is a disposin' of 'is effecs war borned an' vor all I knaw were gotten too. In it 'is veyther an' 'is gran'veyther died, an' a more com-vortabler bed vor a vamily man to die in wor never built. Now don't ee all speak at once. Oo zays zix-an'-zix vor th' bed an' another vour zhillin' vor the veathers? You do, Zimon? Now do-unt ee lose th' chance, Dick Holliday. Thee'st been a-walkin' Zal Burry out quite long enow, an' if 'er mother do speak truth thee 'ull be wantin' a bed vor her two month after thee weddin' at Christmas. Twelve-an'-six vor th' lot, Dick. Good lad! There's many a dame 'ull envy th' lass those veathers when her time comes round an'—any other gentleman biddin' vor this lot. Goin', gone! Th' virst lot to Dick Holliday, an' a bargain at that. May it be a boy, Dick. There's many a lusty man child gotten in th' hay vield," with which final shaft at the ruddy-faced young rustic, Hayward proceeded to put up the next lot.

An hour flew by and the last lot had been sold. The taproom was filled with a babel of voices and the loud meaningless laughter made the mugs hanging in the bar rattle together. Suddenly, during a lull caused by the arrival of a fresh supply of beer, a voice asked: "Zay, Phil Grove, what beest thee g'wain' to do with th' maidie?"

“Zhure,” remarked the hostess, “thee bisn’t g’wain’ to take her trampin’ th’ country wi’ thee?”

Another voice, thick with beer and coarse by nature, chimed in, “Why not put her up vor zale along o’ th’ rest o’ th’ stuff”.

Grove staggered to his feet and swayed to and fro as he remarked thickly, “The girl goes wi’ me”.

“Why not get rid o’ the baggage once and vor all?” continued the voice which had made the proposal. “Thou’lt be twice the man wi’out a girl child a draggin’ at thee tail. Dom’d if I ’ooldn’t buy ’er myself vor ’alf a crowned an’ take ’er whoam to-night.”

Philip swore at him.

His tormentor continued. “A pleasant-faced lass an’ a bit youngish vor to bear childer, but well grown for ’er years——”

Hayward, well primed with drink, joined in the sport, and began to enumerate the excellences of the bargain with many coarse jests. Grove tried to stay the ready tongue, but his own tongue tripped. Finally he staggered towards the speaker, and making a lunge at him with his fist fell across the table, smashing a jug and drenching himself with beer.

“Dom ee all vor a pack o’ drunken boobies,” came a shrill voice from the bar where the landlady stood. “Be off whoam th’ whole lot ov ee or I’ll be losin’ my licence. Ought to be ashamed ov theeselves vor talkin’ zo about a motherless maid. Now ’en be off wi’ ee. Never a drop more beer ’ull I draw vor ee this blessed night.”

The party broke up under the influence of the loud invective of the scold, and Philip, upheld by two of his less drunken companions, made his way home.

Next day he pulled himself together again and went about his work as usual, though his head ached badly and his face was comparatively pale. Lossie, who had been sound asleep when he returned, attributed his

pallor to anxiety, knowing nothing of the beery carousal. She strove to comfort him.

"You look a bit peaked this morning, father," she said. "I wouldn't fret if I were you. There's plenty of folk will be glad to get you to work for them."

"I ben't frettin', lass. If I be a-lookin' a bit peaked I do think it's 'cos I did 'ave a drop too much beer last night," said Grove honestly enough.

"Is that all?" said Lossie. Her father was an abstemious man generally, and she was not troubled by the confession.

"Yes," continued Philip. "Nigh all the chaps in th' village were down at the public laast night an' we-uns had an auction. I zold all our vurniture, little-un."

"Really!" Lossie's eyes opened wide with wonder. "What are you thinking of, father?"

"G'wain' away," said Grove briefly. "G'wain' away az zoon az we can an' az var az our legs 'ull carry us."

"But where?" queried the girl.

"Dom'd if I knows," replied the man. "May-be I 'ull hear o' zummat at Zizziter to-morrow, an' that minds I az 'ow I 'ull take all our green stuff an' taters in wi' I. I ben't g'wain' to leave nowt behind, zo I'd better be gettin' the stuff together."

"No—no," said Lossie. For the first time since she heard the news her voice quivered and the tears mounted to her eyes. "It will be hard to leave our home, father."

"Would ee rayther leave thee veyther to go out alone, little-un?"

"Oh, father!" The tears fell in earnest.

"Do-unt ee take on, I ben't meanin' it," said Philip. "We-uns 'ull be vinding zome plaace whur there ben't no paaizons to worrit us."

Lossie's arms were round his neck the next moment, and she was kissing him and smiling through her tears. So long as she could accompany her father nothing else mattered.

CHAPTER XI

DURING the next week Grove gave no hint of what his intentions were, not even to his daughter, though he had heard of a job which he thought would suit him. He did not go near the public-house until the Saturday night, and then he did not linger there but merely obtained from the landlady the money which had been deposited with her in payment for the articles of furniture he had sold. Lossie did not even know the hour he proposed to depart, and when, after he had finished breakfast on the Sunday morning, he bade her gather her clothes together, she could scarcely believe that the moment of departure had arrived. She would have liked to say farewell to some of her companions but the opportunity was not afforded her.

One farewell had already been taken, however. One afternoon during the week Ruth Ryeland had made her appearance at the cottage and poured out her regret at having been in some degree responsible for Grove's dismissal. Very earnestly she had begged the girl to communicate with her if ever she was in trouble. Lossie had listened quietly, and had promised to write as soon as she could to let Ruth know of her good or ill fortune.

There was no one in sight when father and daughter, each carrying a bundle of clothes, walked out of their home and went steadily away with downcast faces in the direction of Stroud. Just before they departed the lust of revenge in the labourer's heart showed signs of its existence. As he passed out of the door one of the last of the roses which still blossomed on the porch shed a petal or two on his sleeve.

"I'd a'most forgotten," he remarked.

"Forgotten what?" asked Lossie.

For answer Grove pulled his clasp-knife from his pocket and, stooping, hacked through the stem of the bush, and when he had finished covered up his work with a handful of earth.

"Oh, father," commented Lossie. "What a pity to kill our beautiful rose-bush. It's the best in the village."

"It ben't a g'wain' to bloom vor nobody else," said Philip sullenly.

After that they went along the road in silence until they reached the brow of a hill. There Lossie lingered for a last glimpse of the valley which had hitherto formed her world, but her father did not wait, and hastening her steps she soon caught him up, and side by side they stepped out steadily upon the high road.

Lossie soon began to talk cheerily of the future. She was excited at the prospect of new scenes, but she could scarcely get a word from her father. A dull rage was eating at his heart and he could think of no means of satisfying it. They came about mid-day to Stroud and here, favoured by fortune, they began straightway a new life; for at the lodging house where Philip elected to stay for the night he heard of a job which suited his mood to a nicety. Through the little town there happens to pass a canal which at one time was largely used as a means of communication between the Thames and Severn and the night before Grove's arrival one of the boatmen in charge of a barge, who had been drinking too freely, had stepped into the water, instead of into his cabin, and had remained there.

Philip heard the particulars and straightway applied for the vacant berth, and the owner, seeing that he was sufficiently strong to enable him to pole the barge through the tunnels, engaged him at once.

Thus in a couple of days Lossie and her father found their lives entirely changed. Philip's new duties were

wonderfully light. Besides looking after the scarecrow of a horse at whose lean carcass any well-bred hound would have turned up his nose, he found his work principally consisted in sitting at the stern of his barge with his hand on the tiller watching the smoke curl up from the bowl of his pipe, and he sat there for hours so silent that Lossie thought he was still fretting for the home comforts which were unattainable in the confined space afforded by the tiny cabin of the barge. In reality Philip was brooding over a scheme for revenge—a revenge which should be at once complete and yet bring no retribution upon himself. Only one way suggested itself to him. He bethought himself of what had once been said in his hearing about merry men dancing round flaming ricks, and he brooded over the idea until it became an obsession. The opportunity to translate his thoughts into action was not far distant.

Now the canal upon which Grove was required to navigate his barge crosses the outlying spurs of the Cotswolds, and as the barge of which he was in charge was bound for Oxford with a load of coal, on the first day the mileage achieved was not great since there were a long series of locks to negotiate. At the beginning of the second day some hours were occupied in poling the unwieldy craft through a long tunnel, an experience Lossie escaped since she had to take the horse round to the other end by the road. Thereafter their path lay through a lovely country. The clear waters reflected the trees clad in their autumnal robes which overhung the banks. A kingfisher cut the air with a gleam as of a jewelled sword. Here and there a belated dragon-fly hovered over the rushes. It was one of those days in late autumn when summer returns for a last farewell, and Lossie could not control her delight in it. She woke the echoes under the bridges with her laughter, and the hollow banks under the woods threw back to her snatches of her song. When the sun increased to its setting they came to a village where the journey ended

for the day, and here when the barge had been drawn close to the bank and the horse tethered for the night, Philip announced his intention of returning to Grays-bourne in order to get one more glance at his old home. He approached the subject in a hesitating manner unusual with him.

"We be only a couple ov mile vrom Zizziter, little-un," he remarked, when they were seated on the roof of the cabin eating their evening meal of bread and cheese.

"I should have thought we were miles and miles away," said Lossie indifferently.

"Noa," said her father slowly. "The canal do wind round like. Zizziter be off the main zstream, we-uns dount go nigh th' town, but I was thinkin' as 'ow I 'ud like to 'ave a peek at th' old whoam once again. Would ee be aveard if I leaves ee vor a while?"

"Why, father!" exclaimed Lossie in surprise. "Don't you think it will make you fret still more if you go back?"

"I do-unt think it will. I be nigh zertain as 'ow it won't," he replied. "Thee'd best turn in an' shove a stwun agen th' door. I 'ull not be long agettin thur an' back again."

Philip departed at a brisk pace. Lossie watched him uneasily until he was out of sight on the towing path, for she had caught a glimpse of a light in his eye which she did not like. It was a long time before she took her father's advice and turned in.

She fell into one of those calm reveries which are the prerogative of youth. There was nothing to prevent her indulging in her dream. The loneliness was not greater than that of her native village, but it had an element of novelty. To lie curled up in the stern of the barge with a clear still stretch of water before her was a new experience and a dream-provoking one. The stars began to peep from the sky at their reflections in the water, but she still sat watching. Once a couple of rustic lovers strolled by unobservant of the figure curled up in the shadow of the bank, too intent on their own

love-dream to be aware that a girl was keeping vigil within sound of their kisses. That was the only break in the solitude; all the other sounds of the night were part of it. The drone of a winged beetle, the uneasy cry of a moor-hen, the distant tinkle of a sheep-bell merely accentuated the silence. For the first time Lossie let her thoughts take her to the past. For the first time indeed she comprehended that there was such a thing as a past which might never be recalled. At the same moment she awoke to the fact that there was a future. She did not feel the thrill of delight with which youth usually greets the discovery. Retrospect of her life showed existence to have been pleasant. Injustice had wrought a change. The future might only hold the bitterness of further injustice. "Heigho!" she sighed after a couple of hours' musing. "So long as I have father——"

Philip had not returned. She shut herself in the cabin and lay awake for hours. Still she slept at last and so soundly that she did not hear her father's return.

Meanwhile Philip had gone steadily about the business he had in view when he left the barge. He made his way to Cirencester, and on the outskirts of the town he purchased a gallon can. At another shop he had the can filled with paraffin and then he set out for his native village. Any one would have taken him for a farm-labourer going soberly home after an ordinary shopping excursion. When near the village he turned aside from the road and took the footpath which brought him out at the back of the rectory. Thence by cutting across one other field he made his way to the paddock where stood the well-stacked ricks of hay, the produce of the fat glebe. The ricks were built very near to the wall of an old-fashioned coach-house and stable, of which the thatched roof almost touched the side of the ricks. When he stood under the shadow of one of the ricks Philip paused to listen. The night was still. In the rectory all was quiet, every window was in darkness,

not a sound from the village lower down the valley broke the silence. He squeezed himself between the stable wall and the first rick and tore handfuls of the sweet hay out of the side until he had bored an arm's length towards the centre. At the end of the hole he poured a quantity of the paraffin. Then he moved to the next rick and repeated the operation. Once more he came to the open and for full ten minutes stood and listened. An owl hooted twice, but no human sound broke the silence. To Philip the omen seemed favourable. "Mebbe," he muttered, "he's warning his kin, but they be deaf."

He crept behind the ricks again and a match spluttered against the wall. A second match was lighted, then the man emerged and ran across the field. At the first stile he paused and looked back. Could his carefully arranged scheme have miscarried? Even as he questioned himself as to the desirability of returning to assure himself on the point a faint glow on the wall backing the ricks reassured him. He turned his back on the rectory and retraced the path by which he had come. Now and again he paused and looked back, but there was no sign of anything untoward. But when three parts of his journey had been covered he saw, when he turned, a redness in the sky and knew that his work had not been fruitless. At the same moment his quick ear caught the sound of the beat of hoofs on the hard road he had passed over. For the first time that night his heart beat faster than ordinarily. He crouched behind a hedge while the horseman passed by. It was too dark for him to distinguish the features of the horseman, but he thought he could recognise the rector's handy man and groom. He followed the rider as fast as his legs could carry him and arrived at the town he had passed through earlier in the evening just as the fire-bell began to speak its alarm. He made no attempt to conceal himself. The streets were not quite empty. The alarm had brought some people out already, and every one hastened to the fire-station at the centre of the town to

ascertain where the fire might be. Philip followed their example and waited until the firemen arrived, wiping the sleep out of their eyes and struggling to fasten the buckles of cumbersome belts as they ran. Some of the younger inhabitants on learning where the fire was started at once for a six-mile run to the scene, but the elder and sager portion remained to chaff the firemen for their tardiness. Philip remained with the latter, chuckling at every fresh delay, and when at last the manual fire engine was harnessed to two horses and despatched, he went off quietly to his floating home and slept peacefully for a couple of hours.

The next day he was so merry that Lossie scarcely knew him. For some time the barge was passing through a number of locks on a descent from the elevation to which they had climbed in the preceding two days, and it was not until these had been passed and Philip came back to the boat that she could question him as to the reason.

"It seems as if a sight of the old place has done you good, father," she said.

Philip's answer amazed her. "Thee 'ouldn't zay anything as 'ould get thee veyther into trouble, little-un?"

"I, father?" There was the very pride of scorn in the tone with which she rejected the suggestion.

"Zhure, then, I 'ull tell ee why I veels zo murry like this forenoon. I do think as there 'ull be a vine to-do in Graysbourne this day, vor I paid off zome old scores laast night. Aye, little-un," he continued in reply to Lossie's glance of amazement, "I do think as paazon be a poorer man this vury day. I put a light to uns rick-yard laast night an' they did zay, when they comed vor th' vire ingin to Zizziter, as 'ow the rectory itself were ablaze."

"Oh! I hope none of them were burnt," said Lossie.

"No such luck," said her father, a spasm of regret clouding his face for the first time. "None o' them

paaon volk tastes hell this zide ov th' graave. Still"—his face brightened again—"wi' th' hull brood ov 'em a slap at th' pockut touches th' raw."

For some time Lossie was acutely fearful as to the result of the exploit, and she kept looking back upon the towing path expecting to see a posse of police in hot pursuit. But eventually Philip managed to calm her fears, and until other events happened to modify her opinion, she looked upon her father as a hero who had waged successful war upon his enemies and come off scatheless.

For awhile they were happy in their vagabondage.

CHAPTER XII

THE weeks drifted into months, the months passed into the complete cycle of the year, and the Groves were still wandering up and down upon the face of the earth. They became well known upon the towing path of the Thames and Severn canal, and had grown reconciled to the physical discomforts of their lot. Except in the cold days of winter the timbered cabin was not uncomfortable, and Lossie began to wonder how she had ever slept without the lap of the water under the stern for lullaby.

The beginning of the second summer after they had left Graysbourne found them once again about a day's journey from the spot where Philip had set out upon his mission of revenge. In appearance neither father nor daughter had altered much. By reason of their departure Lossie had undoubtedly benefited physically. She had just sufficient duties to occupy her for a portion of the day, and for the rest of the time she was free to lie at ease on the boards and to grow into the possession of a vigorous beauty which was as much of form as of face. The lack of companionship was the great drawback to the life, and the girl grew restive sometimes at being so cut off from communication with the world, for the only people whom they met, the boatmen and their womenkind, were not of the same clean-lived class she had been brought up amongst, and their habits and speech were offensive to her.

The lack of companionship was also felt by Philip Grove, but he did not puke at such as he could obtain. He even felt disposed to resent Lossie's attitude towards their fellow travellers on the towing path. He thought

she was putting on airs because she would not visit some slattern of a woman whose barge would be moored for the night near at hand. He was jealous of her with the jealousy of the purely illiterate towards those possessed of the most rudimentary education. He would taunt her for dallying with such scraps of printed matter as came her way, saying that she was "only a boater's girl, wi' no call to vill her yud wi' book larnin'." Then she would answer him sharply or perhaps ignore him altogether. The fact of being thrown entirely into each other's company strained the bonds which held them together so that father and daughter were in a fair way to become totally estranged.

Unfortunately the companionship Philip did find was not of an improving nature. Whenever he could spare the necessary coppers he would make his way at night when the boat was moored to the nearest inn. In the rural districts there was not much to complain about in the recreation he thus obtained, save that the wit was of the full-flavoured variety which modern taste describes as coarseness. But in the houses of refreshment on the confines of the towns, where factory chimneys blurred the sky with their belchings, and fouled the air with their vapours, the coarseness took a ranker flavour. One district in particular, through which they passed periodically, seemed to drain its human mud like sewage to the lowest level, and the small beershops at the canal side were apparently the open mouths of the sewers of humanity. In frequenting such spots it would have been a wonder if Philip should have escaped contamination. He was, however, perfectly unconscious of the evolution of the baser portion of his nature, and even Lossie was unaware of any change until a trivial incident, the entanglement of their tow rope with that of a passing barge, brought from her father's lips such a stream of filthy invective as sent her shrinking to the little cabin. She had hitherto looked upon her father as something superior to the

rest of the boatmen, whose language had supplied one of the reasons for her refusal to make acquaintance with the women who partnered her lot. From that moment she began to hate the life. Now the time had arrived when she was to hate it still more.

From the day they had left Gloucester, Philip had been morose, and every evening as soon as the horse was tethered he had gone to the nearest public-house for his usual opiate. Lossie had reasoned with him as patiently as she knew how, but had made no impression upon him, while they were mounting the slow steps of the locks which were to bring them to a higher level and a fresher countryside. On this trip they had two more barges behind them, and the boatmen, each with his wife and one or two children, were of a type which revolted Lossie. She angered her father by refusing to speak to their fellow voyagers, and the enmity of the women towards "that uppish gal in the first boat" was venomous in its intensity. On the third day of the journey they came to the long tunnel at the highest level, and the exertion of poling through after the previous night's excesses made Philip still more uneven in his temper. The day's journey had ended at the mouth of the tunnel where there was a house of call which no boatman ever neglected to visit. When everything had been made ready for the night the other men called upon Philip to accompany them to the inn. Grove moved to join them and Lossie strove to persuade him not to do so. Her remonstrances were heard by the others, and they began to chaff him about being tied by the apron strings to a bit of a girl. Lossie still begged him to take no heed of their persuasions. Philip merely growled out a curse and left her.

Later the two wives of the other boatmen joined the party and sat drinking with them until the closing hour arrived. Nearly the whole time they had continued to harp upon one theme, the impudence of a girl attempt-

ing to dissuade a man to forgo his inalienable right to drink. The anger which Philip had been nursing since the commencement of the journey glowed into a fiercer heat under the influence of the liquor and the taunts of his companions. These counsellors were eager to advise him as to the best way of ending his thralldom.

The men urged him to turn the girl adrift to shift for herself. "What's the use," they argued "ov keepin' a strappin' big wench like a lady in the cabin when ee mought have a woman in th' boat as ud do vor ee an' keep ee warm o' nights as well?"

The women were more spiteful in their advice. They were anxious to see the contempt with which Lossie had treated their overtures repaid by a punishment they might see, and gloat over, and twit her with afterwards.

"If she were wench o' mine it 'ud be more'n her'd dare say word to th' old man. She'd taste the end of a rope for certain," said the thin-faced vixen who lived in the second barge.

"A taste of the rope is surely what she do want," agreed the occupant of the other, a powerful Worcester woman, "an' if I was her feyther I'd let her 'ave it too."

"He's afraid of her or else he would," sniggered the first speaker.

"When I was a girl people wasn't so tender about us," said the second.

"Tender, you call it. He's afeard o' bein' summonsed, that's about the truth of the matter."

"I be-unt aveard o' nowt, I be-unt," growled Philip.

"Seein's believin'," said the vixen with a shrill giggle.

"Jesso," remarked the Worcester woman. "If a were to see ee give the lass a good beltin' I'd begin to think as you were a man, more or less."

"Ee won't whop 'er, ee won't. Ee likes bein' put upon by a bit of a gal, ee does," interpolated the husband of the last speaker.

“ Be thee g’wain’ to ’old thee tongues or be I g’wain’ to make ee,” shouted Philip in a fury.

The threat proved effective for a time, but later the subject was once more re-opened, and when at closing time they left the public-house, a reeling party of five, Philip had been worked up to a pitch of fury which needed only the slightest of excuses to find vent.

The boats were barely a hundred yards distant, and they had hardly traversed half the distance when the vixen remarked, “ I s’pose thee wench’ll be ’avin’ a bit o’ supper ready for ee, mate ? ”

“ If she do-unt be waitin’ up vor I,” said Philip thickly “ she ’ud better look out. I be g’wain’ to zhow as I be measter, I be.”

They came to where the boats were moored beneath a high bank draped with beech and birch. The night was perfectly calm, the water motionless, black in the shadow of the banks and in the centre of the canal patterned with a mosaic of silver where the moonbeams broke through the foliage and fell to rest on the still surface. A little further on where the banks fell away the water stretched out into a shining pathway of pure silver. Behind them the stream was lost in the unbroken blackness of the tunnel of which the mouth was the fulfilment of the night. On Philip’s boat was no light nor sign of life.

“ I reckon thee’ll ’ave to wake th’ wench up if ee wants thee zupper,” said the Worcester woman.

“ Oh ! I expec’s as she thinks she’s too ’ansome to trouble about such like. It might spoil ’er beauty sleep,” sneered her companion.

“ Lossie,” shouted Philip. His voice was loud and hoarse, but the only response was a defiant echo from the tunnel.

“ Lossie ! ” His voice was more imperative and still harsher. Still there was no reply.

“ What did I tell yer ? ” asked the vixen.

"I 'ull larn 'er," growled Philip as he lurched aboard the boat and made his way aft.

"Lossie!" he shouted for the third time in the very mouth of the tiny cabin.

The girl, awakened by the unusual summons, hearing only her father's voice and fancying in her semi-conscious condition that he was calling for aid, crept out of the hatch and on to the steps which led to the deck of the cabin.

"Come ee up 'ere," was her father's greeting as he caught her by the arm and swung her up beside him.

"What's the matter, father?" she asked as she strove with her free hand to rub the sleep out of her eyes.

"Whur be my zupper?" said Philip drunkenly.

"I—I don't know what you mean," replied the girl. "You had your supper before you went to—to the public."

"Who be measter 'ere?" queried Philip. "That's what I 'ud like to know."

"What do you mean, father?" she asked shrinkingly. She had never heard him adopt this tone to her before, and, awakened suddenly at midnight to reply to such strange queries, she did not realise that Philip was drunk.

Enlightenment as to her father's meaning came from another source.

"What your feyther do mean," said the woman who had been foremost in egging Grove on to a brutal assertion of his mastership, "let me tell ee what your feyther do mean. I tell ee that ee's jest about tired o' your stuck-up ways, an' findin' out for hissself what a lazy little slut you be, he's just goin' to make ee mend 'em. I wish," she continued, her temper rising as she continued, "I do wish as 'ow ee'd let me 'ave the dealin' with ee for a week or two, I reckon as you'd be a different sort o' wench at the end o' the time."

Lossie was fully awake at last. The voice of the

woman had effectually dispelled sleep. She glanced up and saw the group standing a few yards away on the bank, and instinctively her free hand was lifted to draw her clothes more closely over her bosom. Her tormentor noticed the action and stepped from the bank on to the deck beside her. The rest of the party followed her example.

"Oh! I say," she said tauntingly, "fine ladies ben't so nice about showing their figgers, be they, Sal?"

"Father, why do you let them?" said Lossie appealingly.

"Father, why do you let them?" mocked the Worcester woman, and she took the girl's hand in her own powerful grip. "S'pose we do make ee a vine lady for once, eh, Liza?"

All but Philip laughed boisterously. He stood swaying drunkenly and still holding her by one hand, but he made no movement to protect his daughter when the woman addressed as Liza caught hold of the garment the girl wore and tore it from her shoulders, leaving her standing undraped to the waist.

"A fine-lookin' gal," hiccuped the husband of the woman who had been foremost in the work. "I tell ee what, mate. Lemme take 'er to my boat. I'll tame 'er for ee. Youm welcome to my ole 'ooman 'stead."

Lossie, quivering in very fibre, made another appeal to her father. "Oh! what are you going to do? Why——"

At last she got an answer, though Grove jerked out the words with difficulty. "I—be—measter—'ere. Thi—be my—boat an' I be g'wain' zhow ee—I be measter."

"It's amos-a-pity t'whop zo vine a gal," said the man who had spoken before, and, lurching forward, he laid his coarse hand on the girl's breast.

Lossie shuddered, and the woman who still held her tightly laughed aloud as she felt the quiver in the muscles of the arm.

"Zay, Grove, will ee swop 'er vor my ole 'ooman," he said as he pinched the soft flesh between his fingers.

A glimmer of reason came to Philip's muddled brain. "Nobody zhall lay vinger on th' gal but me." Then bursting forth with a sudden access of fury, he shouted, "Get away vrom th' gel all ov ee or I 'ull be doin' zome ov ee a mischief."

The men fell back, but the woman retained her hold.

"You han't showed us as you be measter," said one of them.

"Zhure, I be measter. I be measter," repeated Grove foolishly, and dropping Lossie's hand he blundered down the steps. Lossie made an attempt to wrench herself free, but the other woman caught hold of the arm Philip had dropped and the effort was unavailing.

"Father, father," she sobbed. "What are you going to do?"

"He's agoin' to take some o' the spirit out o' thee wi' a rope's end, that's what ee's agoin' to do to ee," said the vixen spitefully, "an' ee's brought us 'ere to zhow us that ee's 'ad about enough o' your stuck-up ways, which is not proper in a — o' a boater's gal."

As the woman concluded, Philip returned. Coiled round his hand was a coil of half-inch rope, of which a couple of feet were hanging free. "I be measter 'ere," he repeated once more, and raising his arm he struck her. At the sound of the cut of the rope upon the bare flesh, Grove paused. For a moment there was a silence save for the dripping of water in the depths of the tunnel. Then, with a sudden movement, Lossie wrenched herself free from the grip of the women. They sprang upon their prey again.

"'Adn't we better tie 'er up to the rudder for ee," said one of them.

"Must we-uns tie ee up or will ee take it quiet-like?" said Grove.

A flash of her father's stubborn spirit showed in the

girl. "Make these creatures let go," she remarked. "and I'll stand anything."

"Tha' be vair," the man replied, and he bade the women "Let go".

They obeyed his scowl, and again there was a pause. The moonlight fell straight down upon the group. Lossie stood in the centre with head bent and a wealth of hair falling loose and veiling the terror and shame written upon her countenance. About her were the five faces of her tormentors. They might have belonged to satyrs lured from their fastnesses in the woods by the lust of cruelty. But the girl did not quail. She crossed her arms upon her bosom and waited.

"What! Be gettin' vaint-hearted," sneered one of the women.

With a curse, Philip struck again, and a red line marked his victim from shoulder to shoulder. Lossie set her teeth to repress the cry which rose to her lips. She would rather die than that those fiends should gloat over the expression of her agony.

"You zay I be measter here," said Philip.

Lossie was silent.

"A vew more o' that sort 'ull bring 'er down from the clouds," said the Worcester woman.

Once again Philip struck his daughter, then he threw the rope upon the deck.

The slighter of the two women picked it up. "You han't 'alf paid her," she screamed. "Let me get at the ——" and with all the force of her arm she rained a shower of blows on the girl's back.

Despite herself, a cry of pain was wrung from the sufferer, and at the sound Philip's anger changed its object.

"Didn't I tell ee noa hand but mine zould be laid on th' lass. By God! Zome ov ee shall pay vor it."

He made for the companions of his cruelty with clenched fists, and they fled cursing and reeling from

the boat, Grove blundering after them along the towing path. But he soon forgot the object which had taken him ashore, and grunting and grumbling to himself he returned once more and threw himself down on the deck to sleep.

The night grew silent again. Its beauty was unchanged, but now it only accentuated the pain at Lossie's heart. No tears came to relieve her surcharged feelings, the blows had stricken more deeply than the skin. She crouched in a corner of the barge where there was a sheltered nook amongst the timber with which it was laden, and looked out into the darkness and wished that she was dead.

The moon sank to its setting, but she still gazed out on the water with sorrow-laden eyes, taking no heed of the passing footsteps of the night.

CHAPTER XIII

MORNING broke. With the first glimmer of dawn Lossie moved and shuddered with the cold. She had not remembered previously that her only garment was a short petticoat reaching to the knee. She crept quietly into the cabin and dressed herself in her usual attire. Then she climbed the bank and went in search of the horse. In a few more minutes the barge was moving while Philip still slept soundly on the deck. The main-spring of Lossie's action was to get away from their late companions, and as her love for her father was not yet dead she wanted to get him away too. She dreaded the jeers of the women who had so revenged themselves upon her. The foul suggestions of the men still rankled in her brain. The spot where one of them had laid his hand upon her burned hotter than the weals upon her shoulder. The next time they might persuade her father to worse. She thought to take him away.

At the first bend in the canal she breathed more easily. The horse fell into its usual sober gait, and Lossie jumped into the barge again to prepare breakfast at the intervals she could spare from her attention to the tiller.

The sun had been up some hours before Philip awoke wondering at the motion. He heard his daughter moving, then as he saw her head appear above the hatchway he caught a glance from her eyes and his own fell. He remembered dimly that he had been guilty of some offence for which his manhood took shame.

“Whur be t'other boats?” he asked sullenly.

“Still at tunnel mouth,” replied Lossie shortly.

Slowly Philip called to mind the events of the preceding night though not clearly.

“Will you have breakfast where you are?” asked Lossie. Her lips could not fashion the word “father”.

Philip nodded his acquiescence. The meal was a silent one. The man ate little, the girl nothing. She sat with her hand on the tiller looking always away from him while he, stealing shame-faced glances at her, dared not venture upon a word. The girl at the tiller was not the Lossie he had known hitherto. This girl with the pale regular features, with the eyes out of which the sunshine seemed to have faded, was not his “little-un”. His Lossie had always been so bright and cheerful in the morning.

Thus passed that day and the next. The girl grew paler, her eyes seemed larger. She uttered no word of complaint but never once did she call him father. At the eve of the second day Philip spoke to her humbly:—

“Lossie, I didn’t mean it. It was the devil took me.”

The girl answered him wearily, “Aye, the devil took you”.

The man was really bowed down with shame. “I ’ud not a thought I cud ha’ been zuch a brute. Did I treat ee vury bad, little-un?”

The repentance in his tone moved Lossie to speech. “’Twas not the blows I minded so much though they were cruel. Look here.” She slipped the bodice from her shoulders and Philip saw the marks of his handiwork, the long bruises purpling the white flesh, for the first time.

“I—I did that. God! I couldn’t ha’ done it.”

“Aye, you did that and worse. You shamed me, your little-un as you’ve called me. Me, your Lossie. You stood by and let these women hold me while you beat me. You stood by while they stripped the clothes off my back and the other men—you let them——”

Her voice failed her and the tears came. "Now—now—they will all—laugh—at the—fun—they had with the boater's girl, whose father had her stripped before their eyes."

Lossie's grief had found vent at last, and following the outpouring of her thoughts came the tears which relieved her. Philip could not bear the sound of her passionate sobs and he rose and went forward with the horse. He came back in an hour with a face nearly as pale as the girl's.

"Lossie," he pleaded, "I do zuppose it be-unt no use askin' ee to forget. I must ha' been mad wi' drink. I gets the devil in me." His tone was very humble. "I be main zorry. Zhure, I can't zay how zorry I be. Can ee bring theesel' to vorgive I?"

"Yes, yes, yes," she murmured. Her anger had worn itself out in tears.

"Mought I be a kissin' ov ee once, little-un."

So the reconciliation was effected but—Lossie could no longer look up to her father as one on a pedestal. He was not superior to other men who beat their wives and treated their children foully in the light of day. His feet were of clay too.

One thing she won from him in the discussion that followed. Grove promised her that he would give up his vagabondage and find some other employment where he could secure a home once again and thus make amends for his cruelty.

Thus when their cargo was delivered at Oxford he gave up his boat and sought a carter's place again. But the time of year was against him. The haymaking was over and harvest was not due for a month. His resources would not permit of his being out of work, and when another boat was offered him he had no option but to accept. Nor did Lossie make any strong objection to a temporary renewal of the boatman's life, for this time they were bound for a different port. The

cargo of hay which they had in charge was consigned to Messrs. Medwin & Co., of Peter's Wharf, London, and she had hopes that in the city her father might be able to find the settled employment which the country failed to offer him. Thus two more immigrants were added to the army which is recruited from all quarters of the land to feed the city.

On their journey Philip was very tender with Lossie, and the relationship between them was more nearly that existing between them during the happy days at Grays-bourne when the girl had first come to take charge of and brighten her father's home. Their progress down stream was both rapid and pleasant, and as they got to the lower reaches and found the river gay with men and women in their river bravery, Lossie began to comprehend that life was all holiday to those fortunate enough to be born to silver spoons. Many a glance was directed upon her as she sat with the tiller in her hand, for in her hat of battered straw crowning her hair and shading her sun-burned face she made a charmingly picturesque figure. In fact, so impressed were the occupants of one boat that lay in the shadow under Clieveden woods that the two young men who had been lolling on the cushions cast off their craft and followed the barge in order to get a better view of the budding beauty.

"It's a face I seem to remember," quoth one of them as they passed alongside.

"Dalton," said his companion, "I feel inclined to envy you your memory. I should have made my fortune by now if I had a picture in my head like that." He was a youthful artist and could afford to be enthusiastic, he was so young.

Dalton laughed. "Really I think it is a village girl I met a couple of years ago. The face is really of an uncommon type. Suppose we go through Boulter's at the same time, and I will ask her."

They squeezed their boat into the lock at the tail of

the barge and stood up. The girl was barely a yard away. "Lossie," he said quietly.

She started violently as she looked up and met his gaze. Recognition came instantly.

"Mr. Dalton! Is it—is it you, really?"

"Yes, it is really me," he laughed. "But what are you doing here? I should never have expected to find you steering a barge on the Thames."

"We are going to London," said Lossie.

"I suppose that beast Rawlins made the village too hot to hold you?" said Dalton.

"Yes, sir," said Lossie shyly, her face assuming a ruddier tint under Dalton's gaze.

"Hallo, there!" interrupted a gruff voice from above them on the bank.

Dalton looked up laughing. "Hallo, Grove! How are you? You hardly expected to find an old acquaintance on the Thames, did you?"

"Zhure it bain't young Measter Dalton," said Grove taken aback at the recognition.

"It is, though," was the reply, "and as soon as we are through we will go and have a drink together for auld lang syne."

"Good man," remarked his companion in a whisper. "You give the father a drink while I talk to the daughter. Lossie? What a quaint name. Rather pretty though."

CHAPTER XIV

AS soon as he had recovered from the first shock of surprise, Grove felt very uncomfortable. He could not help recalling his last visit to Graysbourne, and to be recognised by any one seemed to him one step towards the prison gate. He felt, however, that it would be advisable to put a good face upon the meeting and trust to chance to put a speedy end to the acquaintance. He tried to refuse Dalton's friendly offers of refreshment, but found it impossible to do so. He urged the necessity of getting forward, but this argument was destroyed by Lossie, who remarked that they had not yet paused for the usual mid-day rest. Eventually Grove allowed himself to be persuaded to moor a little further down the stream, and there the party picnicked on the barge with the materials provided by Dalton from a convenient inn.

Almost at the commencement of their conversation Philip found relief from the fear which had haunted him.

"I suppose you heard of the loss which befell old Byegrave?" Dalton asked Grove.

"Noa," Philip answered uneasily. "I never hearn word vrom Graysbourne vrom th' day we-uns come out vrom th' pleace."

"Then you'll be glad to hear that the old idiot had all his ricks burned down. He was too mean to pay the insurance, and one night, it must have happened just after you left, his rickyard was burned right out."

Grove's face became very red over the glass of beer which he hastily lifted to his lips, and he spluttered and

choked over it for a moment while Lossie looked at him anxiously.

"Zeems to 'ave gone down th' wrong way," he said when he had recovered his breath. "I be main glad to hear on't."

"I thought you would have choked with your delight," laughed Dalton. "The only unfortunate part of the whole occurrence was that they caught the poor devil who did the business."

"Did they now?" said Philip.

"Yes. He was a tramp who had been refused a crust at the old Pharisee's door."

"Poor man," said Lossie with a little catch in her voice.

"He got five years," said Frank.

"I be main sorry for un," remarked Philip earnestly, "vor I do think as 'ow ee didn't deserve it."

"I suppose he thought it worth while," commented Frank carelessly. "It's lucky you had left the neighbourhood or else, knowing how you hate the parsons, they might have put it on to you."

"An' if I had stayed," said Grove stolidly, "I ben't zo zure as I wouldn't ha' done th' job. Anyways, I be main glad t'were done."

Frank changed the subject with a query as to what they had been doing since they left the village.

"Ax th' little-un," replied Grove, and Lossie shyly entered upon an account of the past two years, and concluded by telling of their desire for a home of their own once more.

"I may be able to advise you, even if I cannot help you more substantially," said Frank. "I owe you a good turn, Grove, for after you left Miss Ryeland told me that one of the reasons for getting rid of you was that she and I used sometimes to meet at your cottage."

"I hearn tell of zomething o' th' zort," replied the man.

"Tell me your plans and I will see what I can do," said Frank.

"I do-unt know mysel' zackly. When we-uns do get to Lunnon town I 'ull look round a bit. They do zay thur's plenty o' work to be vound."

"I'm afraid you will feel rather lost," said Frank. "Where is your journey to end?"

"We be consigned to Med'n an' Co., Peter's Wharf, Lunnon town," replied Philip.

"Medwin! Peter's Wharf! Don't you know that you will meet another old acquaintance there?" asked Dalton in astonishment.

"Never heard name o' Med'n avore as I knaws on," replied Philip.

"You remember Nicholas Ryeland, the farmer's eldest son?"

"To be zhure," said Philip.

"Well, then," Frank continued, "he is Medwin & Co., to all intents and purposes. Mr. Medwin was his uncle, but the management of the business is practically entirely in Ryeland's hands. He could soon find you a job if he liked for they keep a lot of horses and vans."

"Aye," said Grove. "Do ee know un like?"

"No," replied Frank. "I never met him. When first I left Graysbourne I called on him once or twice but he was always out. Then he went away on business abroad and before his return, well, the reason why I should have sought his acquaintance no longer existed." There was a little bitterness in his tone.

"How is Miss Ruth?" asked Lossie.

Frank's face clouded as he answered, "I haven't heard from her for more than a year, Lossie. Your sex soon forget anyone. 'Out of sight out of mind,' you know, especially"—he spoke more to himself than to anyone else—"when one has nothing more to offer them than a share in a struggle with the world."

"I should not have thought Miss Ruth was one of that sort," said Lossie. "I remember——"

"Tell me some other time," he interrupted hastily, for he perceived that his companion was making mental notes that promised banter in the future. "Come, Jack," this to his companion, "it's time we were stirring, else will our muscles rust with idleness, and I don't see the chance of another day up the river for a month at least."

"We-uns must be a gettin' vorrard too," declared Philip.

They did not linger over their adieus, but before they departed Dalton took a postcard from his letter case and scribbled an address upon it. "Post this directly you get to London, Lossie," he said, "and tell me where you are to be found so that I can look you up," and without waiting for a refusal he followed his companion into their boat and shot away up the stream.

Lossie, lost in a maiden's reverie, followed the boat with her eyes. Dalton had looked very handsome in his flannels, and she blushed as she remembered the undisguised admiration which she had seen in his glance when she had timidly looked up at him. Her musing was interrupted by her father's voice.

"We-uns must be gettin' along, little-un. I be glad howsomedever as we met them young chaps, though I were a bit aveard when un spoke about th' vire. I be main zorry vor th' poor chap."

"For Mr. Dalton?"

"Noa. Thee wits be a wool-gatherin' vor zartain, lass. Vor th' chap as were run in vor virin' they ricks."

"So am I," said Lossie, but her mind did not dwell on the subject, and she relapsed into her dreams as she took the tiller in her hand and Philip went to the horse's head.

They made steady progress until dusk, passing Bray, Bovenoy and Windsor. The world had grown fairer to

the girl's eyes. Never had the boater's life seemed so pleasant, nor the country so beautiful. If only Mr. Dalton would see them occasionally she would have been reconciled to the life. He had gone away again, but he had taken her loneliness with him. The rest of the day flew by and she was incredulous when her father told her it was time to moor for the night and bade her get tea ready for him against his return from finding a stable for the horse.

Over their evening meal Lossie for the first time since the night when Philip had beaten her spoke freely and frankly to him. She chattered away so cheerfully that at last Grove remarked upon her mood.

"Meetin' they chaps zims to 'ave done ee good, little-un," he said affectionately. "Zhure, ee be my bright little-un once more."

"I am that glad to think there's a chance of your getting something better to do than this," she said earnestly. "I am sure Mr. Nicholas will find you something to do if only for Miss Ruth's sake."

"Do-unt ee go countin' thee chickens avore they be hatched," replied Philip. "They Ryelands be a hard lot, hard as stwuns, veyther an' zon. Thur ben't a good un amongst th' hull brood."

"There's Miss Ruth——" began Lossie.

"Warn't ee listenin' to what young Measter Dalton a zed, how she gie'd un up when he told her as 'ow un had nowt to offer her."

"There must have been some mistake," said the girl. "She set such store by him."

"Mebbe her did, mebbe her didn't. It's zo wi' all on ee. At virst youm be thinkin' that thur be only one in th' whole world, but after—well, a zecond comes along and zecond's more'n th' virst."

"I don't think I should forget so easily." Luckily in the dark Philip could not see the blush which accompanied the involuntary confession.

"You zame as the rest, little-un," said Philip. "Wait till youm had a young man or two a-walkin' ee out an' zee if th' zecond aren't o' more account than the virst."

"I wonder if Miss Ruth has forgotten us?" asked Lossie turning the conversation to a different topic.

"Long and agone," replied her father. "It's th' rich volk that they do remember. They do-unt harbour th' likes o' we in their minds vor long. It's come to-day an' gone to-morrow zo far as we be consarned. An' now do-unt ee think as 'ow it is time ee turned in?"

Lossie obeyed at once, but it was a long time before she fell asleep. The events of the day had given her so much food for meditation. It was a mystery to her how anyone could ever have forgotten Dalton, yet she could not help but feel a sensation of pleasure in the thought that Ruth Ryeland had dismissed him. There was matter for surmise, too, in the postcard which he had given her. She wondered what sort of a hotel Barnard's Inn might be, for such was the address written on it. Perhaps she would never know for she would never dare show herself in the vicinity. He was a gentleman and she was only a labourer's daughter. He suddenly seemed to have drifted very far away from her. There were tears on her eyelashes when she finally fell asleep.

The morrow brought such a wealth of new experiences that she had no time for gloomy thoughts. Starting at early dawn they made such good progress that by noon they had reached Teddington and there, handing over their horse to another employee of the owner, they attached their barge to a string of similar craft and went swiftly down the stream under tow of a tug.

It was an ideal way of entering London. They missed much of the ugliness of the suburbs, seeing nothing of the brick tentacles which the city stretches out to enfold the green fields—the melancholy sight of

dull houses growing into a perfection of ugliness under the builders' hands. Entering the city on a hay-laden barge under a bright summer sun, which was reflected from the ripples of the water, Lossie did not find the reality of the city of her dreams one whit below her expectation. The ugliness of Brentford was more than balanced by the beauty of Richmond and Kew. Thereafter the houses began to cluster together; at every turn of the river they were bunched more closely until at last the stream which bore them was flowing swiftly between stone embankments and they knew that they were within the confines of the city.

"So this is London," said Lossie, as they swept past Westminster in a whisper touched with something very like awe. The mass of the Houses of Parliament seemed to her to be the highest attainment of grandeur and the sweep of the embankment beyond to attain to an undreamed-of magnificence.

"Aye, I do zuppose as 'ow this be Lunnon town," replied Grove, "though it do zeem big enow vor 'ell."

"Or Heaven," replied Lossie softly and relapsed into silence.

It was here Dalton lived, and she wondered whether any of the mighty buildings upon which her eyes rested happened to shelter him. She felt very small and very unimportant at the thought.

By three o'clock they had arrived at their destination. The tug had cast them off just above Blackfriars Bridge, and Lossie had no difficulty in making out the name of Peter's Wharf on a huge signboard directly they had passed through the arch. Without much difficulty, Philip managed to steer his unwieldy craft to the landing steps, and there he moored the barge to one of the piles. Then he held out his hand to his daughter, and as he helped her ashore he found words for the thought which had been maturing in his brain ever since she had last spoken. "Whichever it be, heaven or hell, we be got here, little-un."

CHAPTER XV

DURING the eighteen months which had passed since Philip Grove had shaken the dust of Graysbourne from off his feet no striking event had occurred in that quiet little valley amongst the Cotswolds until about the time when the outcasts were speeding into London. Then it was that the rector was taken ill.

But though this period had not been marked by any exciting episodes yet they had not proved uneventful to two at least of the inhabitants of the village, though to all appearance it had left them practically unchanged. A keen observer might have noticed a certain gravity in the face of Ruth Ryeland, and a look of pain in her eyes which had not been there before, but there was no other visible evidence to tell that her first love dream had been rudely shattered. Then, too, though the Reverend Robert Rawlins might have added a trifle more complacency to his manner and a little more depth to the sermonic wrinkle at the corner of his mouth, yet he showed no outward signs of the passion which had grown to be the animating principle of his life.

In truth, the curate was a very different person to the cleric who had fought his first fight with the devil in the person of Philip Grove and come off victorious. When that event had happened his personal dignity and his social aspirations had been his animating motives. But during the eighteen months of Grove's pilgrimage both of these had been opposed by a steadily progressive passion for the fairest of his flock. For eighteen months he had striven to free himself from an unexorcisable vision such as had troubled the soul of St.

Anthony. In his walks, in the long watches of the night, in the pulpit even, he could never free himself from it. He could hear always the soft tones of her voice, feel the touch of her soft fingers in his, see the rise and fall of her bosom beneath its veiling fabric. He had striven to dispel the prepossession, but vainly striven, for the original was always at hand to lure him from forgetfulness. So at last he ceased to strive, and thought instead of how best to compass the desire of his heart and make the maiden his. He did not hide from himself that there were difficulties before him, not the least of which was Ruth's ill-concealed aversion from him, but he was possessed of a very genius of patience and he made his approaches so carefully that no one in the village had the slightest idea of the state of his mind. Certainly not one of his congregation ever guessed that the flowery metaphors and poetic quotations with which he garnished his discourses were aimed at the quiet girl whose eyes were never once lifted to the preacher during the course of the service.

Even Ruth herself had not the slightest suspicion of the passion she had inspired. The incidental meeting at the stile when she had fled from him had left only an uneasy feeling which would have prompted her to be careful about giving him any opportunity of being alone with her, but as he never appeared to seek such an opportunity she ceased to think upon the subject and was content to merely ignore him. Yet if she had but known it, it was his hand which had shattered her first romance and he was merely biding his time when he should pluck the fruit of his machinations.

He had good reasons for the exercise of his patience. He wanted Ruth's impressions of Dalton to grow dim, and he wanted also to be in a better position than that of a mere curate before he made any definite advances. Time was on his side, and as the months passed he saw both ends approaching, for while he hoped that Ruth

was forgetting Dalton, none could see more clearly than he how fast the rector's infirmities increased upon him, and that, however tightly the Reverend Samuel Bygrave clung to his temporalities, the time could not be far distant when the living of Graysbourne and its comfortable revenues would once more be at the disposal of its patron the squire.

As rector of the parish he thought that his suit would be irresistible, and accordingly while he waited he sought to ingratiate himself with the patron. He did not adopt the gross flattery of the unmannered lickspittle, the which would have tended to defeat the object he had in view, but he practised the subtle flattery of the graduate in toadyism. Thus upon occasion he would gently remonstrate with the squire for his liberality towards his tenants as something which would tend to make the position of less wealthy landlords difficult. Or on his return from his usual fortnightly attendance at the county bench where he had been administering draconic justice to petty offenders the squire could be certain of obtaining from the Reverend Robert Rawlins a suitable tribute to his unexampled mercifulness. Politically too he worked hand in glove with the squire's party, and had so well commended himself to him that on more than one occasion he had received a hint that the reversion of the living would be his.

When the rector had been taken ill he had hoped for, and yet feared, the sudden maturing of his schemes. He watched the progress of the illness with an anxiety which bore every appearance of solicitude up to the final moment when Mr. Bygrave lay in his chamber in the dreamless stupor which precedes death. But on the evening when hope was abandoned the curate retired to the little sitting-room which he hoped to exchange before long for the more commodious library and counted up his chances. All day he had gone about with dolorous visage and carefully hushed footsteps, but no sooner

was he alone than the mask fell from his countenance. Within a few more days, he mused, he would be relieved from all cause for anxiety. In any case the rector's death would bring about a change in his life. If he were to be offered the living there would be no need for him to depart from his waiting policy in regard to Ruth Ryeland, but if he were passed over it might be necessary that he should declare himself a suitor without further delay.

When his reflections had reached this point he rose from his easy chair and took from the cabinet in which he kept his papers a bundle of letters. They were none of them addressed to himself, and the manner in which he had obtained them might have been called by a very ugly name if it had been brought to the notice of the post-office authorities. Possibly it was for this reason that he thought it well to turn the key in the lock of his door before seating himself again. He told himself that the time had come when it would be as well to destroy this evidence of his watchfulness over the welfare of a member of his flock who might otherwise have been led astray. Often had he trembled at the thought that he was in possession of the documents, but hitherto he had been unable to deny himself the satisfaction of perusing them. For the last time he determined to read them, to gloat over the reproaches which came from a pair of lovers, each convinced by a long and unbroken silence of the other's faithlessness.

He had not found it very difficult to obtain the correspondence which had passed between Ruth Ryeland and Frank Dalton, though it was pure chance which had revealed to him the fact that they were in communication with each other, and undreamed of luck which should have brought it to his notice at the precise time. He had been paying one of his periodical parochial visits to the post-mistress one day just as she happened to be engaged in sorting over the contents of

the bag and he had observed a letter addressed to "Miss Ryeland," in Dalton's handwriting. Straightway he had called the attention of the elderly dame to the missive.

"Dear me! Mrs. Ricketts," he had said. "This is very sad."

"Lawk a mussy, zir," replied the woman, astonished at the lugubrious shadow on the face of the cleric, "whatever be th' matter?"

"This letter is the matter—sin is the matter—seduction is the matter," he replied.

"Deary me!" said the post-mistress; "it ben't no business o' mine."

But he had persuaded her otherwise, and ultimately induced her to deliver over to him all letters addressed either to Ruth or to Dalton. He had lied without stint in order to persuade her to conform to his wishes, and had even declared that he was acting on the authority of Mr. Ryeland who could not put an end to the correspondence himself without defeating his own desires and putting his daughter on her guard. The woman had been hard of persuasion, and she had not become subservient to his will until he had threatened her with Grove's fate, summary ejection from the village and the little shop where she gained a bare subsistence for herself. Her sense of duty was overborne by the threat, and when once she had been frightened into acquiescence he had found it easy to keep her in pleasant subjection by the gracious bestowal of trivial favours.

One by one Rawlins read the letters he had thus obtained. The first he had allowed to proceed to its destination, for it had told of a quarrel at home and Dalton's determination to go out into the world to carve out a career for himself. Ruth's reply was the first of those in the curate's possession. It was bright, vivid, full of eager questioning. Then came several, some short, some long, all alike filled with anxious inquiry as to the reason for the other's failure to reply. Then as the weeks

had passed the tone of the letters changed. They became filled with the sadness of despair. One by one he read the letters, and one by one after reading them he placed them in the empty grate and lighting them with a match watched them shrivel away in a puff of smoke and flame with savage satisfaction. He came to the two last, written, curiously enough, on the same day some six months previously. Unwearied with his task he turned to them with closer attention than he had bestowed upon any of the previous ones. First he took up Dalton's. There was no endearing epithet at the commencement. It started baldly:—

“Why have you forgotten me? What have I done? I suppose it is because I have no longer any hopes of wealth and position except such as can be won by my own endeavour. Is this so? I have asked you the question many times since I told you of my determination but you have never replied. Answer me this once, Ruth. I wish I could forget. Through the long months which have passed since first I asked you to tell me why you would not answer my letters I have striven to forget but I cannot. I will not ask you again, all I want to know is that you are well and alive. Tell me that and I will not weary you with importunities. Remember me and laugh at me if you like as a love-sick fool but send me one word. I would come to Graysbourne but, laugh again, I have no money. I gave up everything rather than give up you and this is the result. Laugh once more at my folly but send me at least one word by your own hand if that word be only ‘farewell’.”

The curate watched this letter blaze and flicker into nothingness before turning to the last in his possession. Ruth had written more piteously.

“To my love who has forgotten me I would tell if I could the sadness that now is ever with me. Yes, Frank, I may have written bitter words when first I realised that you were grown indifferent and cold, for

my pride was awakened and it bade me meet indifference with indifference. But in my loneliness I have repented. I know now that I never meant aught that was unkind whatever I may have written. It was my love speaking in its despair the delirious words of pain. So forgive me if they have offended you. You know that I am a woman and you should know that I love. I did not think that you could be false. Is it that you have discovered that you were mistaken in thinking that you loved me? If so, why not tell me so? I could bear it. I could not hate you. I should not die. Men nor women die of heartache else the world would be soon empty, I am afraid, but I could bear my heartache better if I heard from you. Write to me once again, dear, if only to let me know that you are alive and well. You have been silent so long that I hardly dare hope for an answer. God grant I be disappointed."

Here the letter broke off abruptly. Half a sheet had been torn away, but Rawlins remembered well what had followed for it had served well as an answer to the letter from Dalton which he had just destroyed. There had only been two more words scrawled across the page, simply, "Farewell, farewell". When Dalton had received these they had seemed a mocking reply to his entreaty, and he had set his teeth grimly and gone about his day's work with the sickness of heart which comes to youth with the shattering of an ideal.

The curate watched this last of the letters crumble into a little heap in the grate with an unpleasant smile. His action had been surely well advised. . . . All the time that he had been robbing Ruth of love he had been watching carefully for signs of the effect of his work upon her. He had detected no line to break the purity of her brow, had remarked no unusual pallor in her cheek, and so he told himself that he had done right in putting an end to the boy and girl flirtation. He tried seriously to solve the problem of the attraction the girl

had for him. What was there about her which should have forced him to set aside his cherished intention of asking in marriage one of the dowerless daughters of some county magnate who should 'by her connection with the county families give to his social position a solidity which it lacked? Never before had he met a woman who had stirred his cold blood as had this daughter of a yeoman. It was true that she had inherent qualities which would lift her intellectually to a much higher level than was possible of attainment by most of the women about whose skirts he had fluttered. But she had flouted him. Perhaps that was the reason. Anyhow he longed to trample on her pride and to bring her into subjection to him. There was only one way in which he could do so—he was decorous enough in all social observances and relations—it was only by marriage, by the daily intercourse and communion of wedded life that he would be able to wipe out the memory of her scorn.

Marriage? The very thought brought a warm flush of warm blood to his cheek. A thousand delightful thoughts crowded into his brain as he pictured to himself the taming of this bird, once she was safely barred in the cage he would gild for her imprisonment. He went to the window for the night air to cool his head and was conscious of a sudden bustle and disturbance below stairs. It dawned upon him that the time had nearly come for him to act. He went to the door and had barely unlocked it before a servant knocked and he heard her voice asking him to step downstairs as the rector was much worse. He followed the maid to the sick man's chamber.

He was met by Mrs. Bygrave. She spoke but one word but it was enough.

“Dying.”

The exultation in his heart robbed him of speech for a moment, and when words came to his lips, it left a

tremor in his voice that gave it the accent of sorrow. He turned to the dying man's wife:—

“My dear Mrs. Bygrave, I am glad that I did not retire to-night. I felt I could not rest with such trouble in the house, and I have been praying that our beloved rector might be spared to us. Even yet there may be hope.”

Mrs. Bygrave shook her head and tears rolled from her eyes. “The doctor—said—” she sobbed, “he—cannot last more—more than five minutes. Will—will you pray?”

The curate bowed his head in mute assent and moved to the foot of the bed upon which the rector lay drawing his breath stertorously. The watchers fell on their knees, save only the doctor who tried vainly to administer a stimulant to the patient. Then in the silence of the chamber the curate began to recite the commendatory prayer for a sick person at the point of departure.

“O Almighty God, with whom do live the spirits of just men made perfect—”

The words were pat upon his lips, he intoned them with the perfect drawl of the practised cleric, but his thoughts wandered.

“—after they are delivered from their earthly prisons—”

The squire was resident at the hall, would it be advisable to call upon him on the morrow?

“—we humbly commend the soul of this Thy servant, our dear brother—”

No, hardly. Too great eagerness to step into the shoes of our dear brother might defeat its own object.

“—into Thy hands as into the hands of a faithful Creator and most merciful Saviour—”

How then might he best convey his hope that the half promise made to him should be fulfilled?

“—most humbly beseeching Thee that it may be precious in Thy sight—”

For the patron would most certainly be besieged with requests from acquaintances and friends who would have no scruples in asking for preferment for protegés of their own.

“—Wash it we pray Thee in the blood of that Immaculate Lamb—”

Even supposing the preferment were denied him he could not leave the parish until—

“—that was slain to take away the sins of the world—”

—until he could carry Ruth Ryeland away with him.

“—that, whatsoever defilements it may have contracted in the midst of this naughty and miserable world—”

But if the promise to him should be redeemed—

“—through the lusts of the flesh or the wiles of Satan being purged and done away—”

—surely the farmer’s daughter would never refuse the rector’s suit.

“—it may be presented pure and without spot before Thee—”

So occupied was he with his thoughts that he had failed to observe that the breathing of the sick man had ceased. Now the doctor turned away from the bed and made a slight gesture. The curate noted the movement and his voice became fuller and stronger.

“And teach us who survive in this and other like daily spectacles of mortality to see how frail and uncertain our own condition is—”

Uncertain? Yes. The words might be prophetic. He must make some plan.

“—and so to number our days that we may seriously apply our hearts to that holy and heavenly wisdom—”

For if another were to be preferred before him—no, that thought was too horrible.

“—whilst we live here, which may in the end bring us to life everlasting—”

The best course to adopt would need careful consideration. For he must be rector at Graysbourne.

“— through the merits of Jesus Christ, Thine only Son, our Lord. Amen.”

The amen was echoed from the others present, and in the silence which followed it was borne in upon Mrs. Bygrave that she was widowed in her age. All unnoticed the curate left the chamber and retired again to his room from which he had been summoned. He was glad to be alone, he had his plans to mature, and though he was almost convinced that his desire would be attained, yet he would leave as little to chance as might possibly be avoided.

CHAPTER XVI

THE Reverend Robert Rawlins found that it was a more difficult job than he expected to formulate a plan of action. Several times he commenced a letter to the squire which should contain a delicately veiled hint of his expectation of the presentation, under guise of an announcement of Mr. Byegrave's decease. But he was satisfied with none of his efforts, and each epistle was in turn consigned to ashes. He was too careful to give servants the trouble of piecing together the fragments of a torn up letter.

The clock in the hall downstairs chimed three, but he had not succeeded in drafting the letter. An hour later he threw down his pen and, deciding to call on the squire, abandoned himself to his dreams of what would happen when the living was his. When five o'clock struck he was fast asleep in his arm-chair.

He did not awake until nine, wondering then at the strange cramps in his limbs, but as remembrance came back to him he smiled and, walking across to the mirror on his dressing-table, he viewed his dishevelled appearance with satisfaction. "I shall pass muster," he remarked. "The squire will not see in me the eager place-hunter if I call on him this morning. I really should not have supposed that this terrible grief would have made so much difference in my appearance in one night."

He made a careful toilet in order that he might not lose any of the effects of his semi-vigil and went downstairs to breakfast. He had the table to himself, for Mrs. Byegrave was still sleeping under the influence of

the opiate which the doctor had prescribed for her. After the meal there were a few minor matters which occupied him until he thought it was time for him to call on the squire, but the morning's reflections only confirmed him in his decision as to the course it would be best for him to pursue. Still it was with many a tremor that he set out for the interview.

He need not have worried over the matter as it happened. The interview proved so satisfactory that, as he walked in the middle of the road on his return to the rectory, he looked an inch taller than usual. He held himself erect, his pallor had given way to a genuine flush of triumph, and he glanced at the church as he passed with the glance of ownership.

He had not found it necessary even to broach the subject of the next presentation of the living himself, for after the usual commonplaces of regret at the news of the death of Mr. Bygrave, the squire had startled him with the blunt question: "How long will it be before your induction can take place?"

"Am I—am I really to understand that you offer me the living?" stammered Rawlins.

"I mean it," said the squire, "and I take it that you will not be fool enough to refuse it."

Rawlins adapted himself instantly to the squire's mood.

"Certainly not," he answered readily. "I shall only be too delighted to take advantage of your kind offer. I like the people, the living is a comfortable one, and you have always been so good to me that I shall be only too pleased if ever the opportunity offers itself to be in a position to devote myself to your interests."

"Spoken like a sensible man," responded the squire. "I will send you the formal offer within the week. It will save me an immense lot of bother to be able to say that the living has been presented, for every d——d needy curate in the kingdom will be pestering me for the presentation."

They discussed the details for some minutes, and then the curate took his leave, but before he departed he had practical exemplification of the alteration in his social status.

“By the way,” remarked the squire as he held out his hand, “won’t you come and dine with me one day next week, say a week to-morrow; there are a number of things we ought to talk over.”

Rawlins had lunched at the Hall, but hitherto he had never been bidden to the dinner table, and to him the invitation seemed a seal put upon his preferment.

He tasted again of the sweets of success on the day of the funeral when, after the ceremony, many clerical guests and unclerical relatives of the deceased clergyman returned to the rectory to partake of the baked meats. After Mrs. Bygrave had retired from the scene the clerics began to discuss the question of the presentation of the living, which had not hitherto been announced. One thought that an old favourite of the squire’s who had occupied an adjacent parish before taking a town charge might possibly be persuaded to return. Another fancied that the double first of Oxford who, a few miles away, was bringing up ten children on £130 a year would get such a strong commendation from the bishop as to ensure the presentation being made to him. Not one of the party thought the curate was likely to upset their surmises and theories. Indeed, he had been full of humility throughout the day, putting himself at everybody’s disposal. He listened to the conversation with a smile that was more than half a sneer. When he essayed to join in the discussion he was ignored. But he soon had his revenge.

When there came a pause in the conversation, he addressed himself to the Archdeacon of the district, whose services had been requisitioned for the funeral service.

“My dear sir,” he remarked, “I trust your services

will be available when the time comes to welcome the new incumbent."

The Archdeacon strove to freeze the questioner with a glance. It was an unwarrantable liberty for a mere curate to dare address him as "My dear sir".

"My services will certainly be at the disposal of the new incumbent if he should desire to avail himself of them," he replied stiffly.

"Then you know to whom the living has been offered?" asked a number of voices.

In reply the curate held out to the Archdeacon a sheet of notepaper. When that gentleman had read the communication which contained the formal offer made by the squire his tone changed immediately.

"My dear Mr. Rawlins, please accept my congratulations. It is rare for merit to meet with such early recognition. You are most fortunate in this respect."

The others followed suit, and Rawlins took no less pleasure in his triumph because some of the party failed to conceal entirely the envy of his good fortune which they manifestly felt. For the next week or two the cup of pleasure was always at his lips. He enjoyed the deeper curtseys of the village dames, the more profound bows of the almsmen on the church charities, the additional touch of awe in the attitude of the school children. Twice, also, he dined with the squire, and discussed the affairs of the village and the county over a bottle of port. On the second of these occasions the wine so loosened his tongue that he began to talk of a scheme which had occurred to him for decorating the interior of the church. He had enlarged upon the desirability of oak and stained glass and plate for the altar until an elongation of his host's visage and a remark that he would have a difficulty in these hard times in raising the necessary funds, brought him to a standstill.

Eager to dispel the impression evidently forming in the squire's mind that he had unwittingly let loose a rabid

restoration fund collector upon his threshold, the rector-elect at once remarked, "It will be quite unnecessary to trouble any of my parishioners in this matter; fortunately I am in a position to see to such things myself". Then, in answer to the surprised interrogation of his host, he continued, "You see, my people are very well off, I may say they are very wealthy in fact, and as I am the only son it is only natural that my parents should wish to devote part of their substance through me to the glory of the Church".

"But to complete your plans would cost hundreds, perhaps thousands," objected the squire.

"Either would be equally trifling to them," replied Rawlins carelessly.

From this moment the squire began to respect his new rector. He had presented the living to a man for nothing when, if he had only known, he might have sold the presentation to the father of that person and made a handsome sum by very simple simony.

Not, however, until Mrs. Bygrave had departed did Rawlins feel really settled. The widow did not recover quickly from the shock of her husband's death, and the doctor recommended a complete change of scene to her. She was anxious herself to depart, for the knowledge that very shortly her former curate would be master in the house where she had kept him in subjection was unpleasant, and she was too proud to remain for a moment on sufferance.

While all these events were happening, he still hid from everybody the real desire of his heart. Now he could afford to wait. But his actions were all directed to one end. It was Ruth whom he had in his mind when immediately after Mrs. Bygrave's departure he set about the furnishing and decoration of the rectory. His expenditure on these objects was the talk of the village. The servants' quarters were enlarged. A housekeeper made her appearance, a middle-aged

woman with respectability written on every furrow of her face and every fold of her dress. Mrs. Byegrave had been content with two maidservants besides the cook and the handyman who acted as gardener, coachman and butler. Rawlins added a footman and coachman to his establishment, besides increasing the female staff by two. When he had finished there was not a better arranged establishment in the county, and even the bishop was not better lodged or served.

His preparations completed, Rawlins next step was to return the squire's courtesies. Not without some misgivings, born of remembrance of Mrs. Byegrave's cook, the squire had accepted the invitation.

On his arrival, Rawlins, with natural pride, gratified the squire's curiosity regarding the changes which had been made by escorting his guest over the rectory. To say that the squire was astonished by no means expressed his feelings at sight of the luxury with which the former curate had surrounded himself. The squire was speechless until he had managed to get into a corner of the library and had sworn a couple of oaths softly to himself. The dinner, too, was far beyond his expectations, and as regards the wine—well, at the end of the meal he said in a most impressive tone to his host, "Rawlins, may you long be spared to dwell amongst us in this village. This port is one of the finest I have ever sipped."

"I am glad you like the wine," replied the rector-elect. "You know I take but little myself, but I like if I can to provide something drinkable for my friends."

"Drinkable? Why, this is nectar, sir."

"I must not take credit for that," said Rawlins, with a smile. "I wrote to my father to stock my cellar, and he has very kindly done so from his own. He was once in the wine trade, you know."

"I do not wonder that he is wealthy," said the squire. "He must be a man of genius."

"He considers himself a fair judge of port," replied the host.

The squire's appreciation was too great to be expressed in words. He poured out another glass for himself and passed the decanter.

They sat in silence until the decanter was empty. The host rose and his guest looked at him regretfully. Rawlins answered the mute reproach. "It is a glorious night, squire. Suppose we have the next bottle on the verandah."

The squire's face cleared again. They went out. The footman brought them easy chairs and placed between them a little table and glasses, and when they were seated the butler brought to them with loving care a cradled bottle.

"Have you much of it?" asked the squire.

"Of this, twenty dozen," was the answer.

The squire sighed. "I envy you," he remarked and fell to sipping again.

The night was delightfully warm. The candles had been lit in the room behind them and before them the golden globe of the harvest moon flooded the landscape with light. "A cigar?" asked the host.

"Not till the port is done," said the squire.

Presently the squire spoke again and there was almost a touch of deference in his tone.

"Have you ever thought of marriage, Rawlins?"

For a moment the rector-elect was startled. "Until the last few days—until I was settled here," he replied, "the thought had not crossed my mind."

"You must marry," said the squire. "If I had a daughter I should be glad if you could win her."

Rawlins bowed his acknowledgments.

"I am almost afraid," said he, "to ask one of the maidens of to-day to come and settle in so quiet a spot. Indeed I am not yet quite decided on general principles whether it is desirable for the clergy to wed."

"This," said the squire indicating wine, verandah and house generally with a sweep of his arm, "this needs a mistress to complete your comfort. No man with a wine like this in his cellar should have a vacant place in his bed."

Rawlins coughed. "I am beginning to be of your opinion but I am afraid that my ideal is rather a high one," he remarked.

"There are no lack of women in the land," said the squire.

"The wife I should require," said Rawlins speaking slowly, "must be one to whom the grosser side of life is unknown. I don't want to marry a girl who has gone through the excitements of a couple of seasons in town and played with love at the lips of half a dozen of the young men of to-day. She must be pure in mind and yet with an education which will enable her to occupy her position with dignity."

"H—m," said the squire.

"She must be a loving, helpful companion and I should prefer that she should not forget the reverence due to my vocation."

"I'm afraid if you want that in a wife you will have to choose amongst the village girls," replied the squire drily.

"The idea had already occurred to me."

"You would never be so mad. That would never do," declared the squire in real alarm.

"No," smiled Rawlins, "I should not look for a wife amongst the peasantry. But it has occurred to me that if I should meet the girl whose qualifications were otherwise in accordance with my wishes I should not allow the fact that her father was one of the tenantry to stand in the way of my asking her to share my home and fortune."

"But——" began the squire.

"One moment," interrupted Rawlins. "You must

understand that my descent is not aristocratic. Now if I were to become connected with one of the county families I might take a secondary place in my own household."

"There is reason in your argument," agreed the squire. "If it is not impertinent, may I ask if your argument is *post hoc* or *propter hoc*?"

The rector-elect was silent for a minute while his guest regarded him curiously. "In confidence, squire——" he began, then paused.

"Damme, if I didn't think so," said the squire in high glee. "Tell me her name. Come, I'll make a guess. There's only one girl in the neighbourhood who would suit you, and by the Lord she makes amends for the absence of all the rest. Am I not right? When is the wedding to be?"

"I have not given a hint of my intentions to a soul but yourself," replied Rawlins. "In fact, I have doubted greatly the wisdom of marrying anyone in this neighbourhood. If our neighbours should refuse to receive her all our social relaxations would be cut off——"

The squire held a glass aloft. "The health of Miss Ruth Ryeland. Gad, if I were your age I would have tasted those pretty lips a year ago, whatever the colour of my coat."

"You have discovered my secret," said the cleric.

"Go in and win, my boy," declared the old fox-hunter enthusiastically. "I'll stand by you and, damme, when the pair of you are spliced I'll take it upon myself to answer for the county. Not that there is likely to be any need of my doing so. On the Cotswolds as everywhere else in the world a full pocket is as good a passport as twenty-four quarterings on your coat of arms. It's my belief that old Ryeland has a bigger balance at his bank than I am ever likely to have. Her brother is partner in one of the biggest East India merchants in the City of London and married to the

daughter and only child of the other partner in the firm, who, by the way, is his uncle. What with money of your own and wealthy relatives, there's not a house in the county will not open its doors to you."

The Reverend Robert Rawlins's brain was awlirl with the influence of the wine and the conversation. His blood was fired at the thought of marriage with Ruth. He saw the squire finish the port, but he wanted to remain out there in the moonlight and dream of the bliss which would soon be his.

"Shall we venture on a third bottle?" he asked the squire.

"No," said his guest. "My palate now would not do it justice."

Rawlins touched a bell at his elbow, and as the butler appeared he said, "Phillips, we will have the coffee here and the black seal brandy." Then he turned to the squire. "A mouthful of brandy will be a protection against the night air."

"I don't think I dare," replied the squire.

"It is '48," murmured the host.

"A—h!" responded the squire.

CHAPTER XVII

THAMES STREET is by no means given over to romance during the day, yet if anyone with an idle hour at command likes to spend it in seeking an old world scene which might form a suitable setting for a romantic story he might by chance or of knowledge discover such in some of the lanes in this part of riverside London. For there still exist in the quarter one or two bits of old London which either by reason of the conservative traditions of the owners or, may-hap by chance, have bade a successful defiance to time and the housebreaker. Until a few years ago, for instance, there still existed on the north bank of the Thames an old city mansion tucked away between two modern warehouses, for all the world like an elderly spinster of unexceptional pedigree between two mushroom millionaires. Its entrance was through a long gloomy archway, squarely built of stone and oaken beams black with age, and paved with those rounded cobbles upon which the passage of waggons for a couple of centuries had failed to make a visible impression. The archway led into a courtyard whence the sunrays were excluded, save for an hour or two at mid-day in midsummer, by the towering buildings surrounding it. On three sides of the yard were warehouses, on the fourth, the river-side, was a dwelling-house. Once it had been the residence of the merchants who had grown rich on the argosies from the East landed there. On the right hand a modern counting-house had been built out into the yard, and on the left another archway pierced the wall and gave access to the river.

If you took a boat and examined the house from the

river you would have observed that the house had a faded air as of the man who struggles to keep up appearances under adverse circumstances. The ground-floor windows had given way to wooden shutters. Above, the house was built out so that a big bow window looked out upon the river on the first floor, and on the second there was a railed wooden balcony. But the paint was peeling from the wood, the latticed windows were rusting on their hinges, and everything about it spoke more eloquently of the past than of interest in the future.

It was here that the Medwins, generation after generation, had carried on their business. The earlier members of the family had lived there, but the later Medwins, like all the wealthier citizens, had sought suburban retreats and given up the time-honoured mansion to a caretaker.

Mr John Medwin, the merchant regnant at the time of Grove's arrival, had inherited all the traditions and all the virtues of his ancestors as well as their property, and in his own opinion had added as much to the credit of the former as to the credit of the latter. At all events, the commercial virtues were well represented by him. There was no record of any bill which had been accepted by the firm failing to be punctually met. He, no more than any one of the ten Medwins who had ruled in the counting-house before him, had ever engaged in disastrous speculation. Mushroom firms which had sprung up times out of number and disappeared in a few years had often ridiculed the old-fashioned methods of doing business adopted by the firm, but Medwin & Co. had survived their more up-to-date methods.

There was only one tradition set by his predecessors which Mr. John Medwin had failed to carry out. In spite of a couple of wives—he had married the second exactly fifteen months after the death of the first—he had failed to compass a son and heir to the traditions and the business. Fate had forbidden him the fulfilment of the desire of his heart and had fobbed him off

with a daughter when he was in his fiftieth year. He never tired of bewailing his misfortune in this respect with the result that his wife bore the appearance of one who was ever in sackcloth and ashes for an unpardonable fault, while the daughter grew up with the feeling that she had no business to have come into the world at all. It was not, however, until he had passed his sixth decade and his wife her fiftieth birthday that he abandoned hopes of begetting a son and decided that he must take an outsider into the business. Having faith in the Medwin blood he determined to see whether any of its business qualities were to be found in any of the collateral branches of the family. It was as a result of this determination that Nicholas Ryeland, the son of his only sister, entered the house of Medwin & Co., and at the age of eighteen first took his place at a desk in his uncle's counting-house.

From the very first he had won favour with John Medwin. He was not afraid of work. He had a good head for figures, and he was as keen in getting full value for his money, whether paid as wages or for goods, as his uncle could desire. In ten years he had so impressed the head of the firm with his value that on his twenty-eighth birthday he was scarcely surprised at being offered a partnership in the firm. There was a condition attached to the offer. John Medwin could not brook the thought of his money going out of the family, and Ryeland was only allowed to enter the firm on the understanding that he married his cousin.

Nicholas Ryeland had never hesitated about accepting the offer. Nor had his cousin objected. Norah Medwin was a colourless young person of twenty at the time, and was as ready to accept the bridegroom provided for her by her father as she had accepted everything he had willed beforetime. Nicholas pleased her eye at least as much as any other young man of her acquaintance, while he had never bored her with sentimentalities in

which certain other suitors for her prospective dowry indulged.

The wedding had been celebrated with due regard to appearances, and after a Continental trip the young couple settled down in a house at Clapham, in those days the resort of the wealthy city merchant, and in due course a son was born to them.

Mr John Medwin hailed the advent of this heir to the business and traditions of his house as if it had been his own son. For the first time in his life he was proud of his daughter, and feeling that at last the continuity of the firm was safe he allowed the control of the business to pass almost entirely into the hands of his son-in-law, only giving such time to it as would enable him to make sure that the youthful impatience of his partner to increase the scope of the business did not lead him into undue risks. He never found cause for any apprehension, however, and he noted with keen delight that under the young man's management the business prospered to such an extent that after a couple of years his half share of the profits was very little less than the whole had been previously.

Undoubtedly much of Ryeland's success in the management of the business was due to his attention to the details. Nothing was too small to be worthy his attention, and thus it happened that on the afternoon of the arrival of the barge at Peter's Wharf, Philip Grove renewed his acquaintance with the son of his old master.

It was a Saturday afternoon, and Ryeland had stayed beyond the usual time in order to go through a number of applications for the post of caretaker to the premises which had become vacant through the death of the man who had served Medwin & Co. in that capacity for the previous twenty years.

All but one of the clerks had left, and when Philip Grove found his way to the office door that young

gentleman thought it best to inform his employer of the fact.

“Eh! What’s that?” said Nicholas looking up, “the hay I ordered from Oxford? What on earth do they mean by delivering on Saturday afternoon? You had better see if you can get a couple of casual hands from outside and load it at once. Stay a minute, though, until I have been to see whether it is all that old rogue promised when I bought it.”

He passed from the counting-house and through the archway on to the wharf, where in olden times all the merchandise had been landed from lighters which brought the cargoes from the ships anchored in the pool. But that was before the days of steam, and when the tonnage of their vessels had been registered in hundreds instead of thousands. Now their cargoes were unloaded at the East India Docks, and only occasionally a lighter was to be seen moored to the oaken piles which, worn to half their original thickness, still showed a stout heart to the water and the ropes which chafed them.

Philip, after announcing the arrival, had returned to the barge, and was busy making it more secure to the piles. Ryeland hailed him.

“Hallo, my man! Pull off one of those cloths and let me see what sort of stuff you’ve brought us.

Philip recognised a familiar ring in the voice but he said nothing, as he proceeded to obey the order, until Ryeland stepped on to the barge to examine the hay more closely.

“Do-unt it mind ee o’ th’ aay-vield down to Graysbourne?” said Grove.

The city man looked up and scanned the bargeman closely.

“What do you know about Graysbourne?”

“Zhure, thee memory be zhorter nor mine, Measter Nicholas,” replied Philip with a broad smile.

Ryeland puzzled his brains in vain. “I seem to remember you but—but——”

"I be Philip Grove."

"Now I remember, they told me you had left the old place. And so you have turned bargee? How does the life suit you, Grove?"

"None too kindly, zur," replied the labourer. "Th' little-un and I be about tired o' wanderin'."

"The little-un?" repeated Nicholas, then turning to the clerk who had followed him to the wharf he bade him go in search of the men, and when the youth had gone he sat down on the hay and asked again, "Who is the little-un, Grove?"

"Lossie," shouted Philip and the girl made her appearance from the tiny cabin.

"Little-one," laughed Nicholas. "Your little-one has grown into quite a woman," and turning to the girl he said kindly, "I had some difficulty in recognising your father, but I should never have known you. I hope she's a good girl, Grove."

"Aye, I do-unt vind no fault wi' th' lass."

"And so you are tired of life on a barge, Grove. Well, if you settle down I should doubt whether you keep your little-un very long, Grove. Those bright eyes of hers will soon find a husband for her, I'll warrant."

Lossie shook her head and the sunlight flashed from her curls. "By Jove, she is a pretty girl," thought Ryeland, but he turned to her father with a query, "What are you thinking of doing?"

"Dunno, I'm zhure, zur. I was thinkin' maybe as 'ow your volk mought be wantin' a caater?"

"I'm afraid you would find the work very different from that on the farm," said Nicholas, laughing again at the idea of Grove driving a van in the traffic of London. He was watching Lossie as he spoke and noted that the tears rose to her eyes. Her youth, her freshness, her unmistakable beauty, all appealed to him, and he was sorry that he had spoken so hastily. He was silent for awhile biting a stem he had drawn from the hay. An

idea had occurred to him and he was debating whether it was worth the trouble of putting it into execution. Another glance at the girl decided him.

"I've just thought of something," said Nicholas, still looking at Lossie. Her face brightened at once.

"I am wanting a caretaker, a man to live here and look after the place. It would be absolutely necessary for him to be a steady man, Grove."

"Nobody could zay I be-unt steady," replied the labourer stolidly. "What be thur to do like?"

"You were steady enough in the old days," said Rye-land. "What you would have to do," he continued, "would be to look after the place and clean up generally. Go over the warehouses after every one has left and see that the lights are out and everything safe. You would have charge of the stables and have to see that the horses are properly fed and littered down, while—but it is not like living in the country, you know."

"I do think I 'ud be able to do it, zur," said Philip.

Nicholas still looked undecided. "You see, we really want a married man, because there are the offices to keep clean and occasionally when I am working late I stop here for the night so that there are my rooms to be looked after. I don't know whether Lossie could see to that part of the work."

"Oh, indeed, I would try," said the girl so earnestly that Nicholas smiled again. Here was the very haven of rest for which she had wished. A comfortable home where her father might settle down and be away from all the temptations born of his wandering existence. Then, too, Mr. Dalton was in London. Her musing stopped there.

"Well, you had both better see what there is to do before you decide. I will show you over the place presently, meanwhile you might help the men I have sent for to unload the hay, so you will have plenty to do."

Nicholas Ryeland went back to the counting-house and laughed at the impulse which had prompted him to offer the vacant berth to a farm labourer. He had been in the habit of utilising one of the rooms he reserved for himself in the old house to sleep in on those occasions when he stayed in town, not on business only, and occasionally little parties had met in the other room upstairs at which the proceedings would have sadly shocked the respectable inhabitants of Clapham. Yet on second thoughts, he decided, there was much to be said in favour of engaging the Groves. Philip was ignorant, but he certainly had a good knowledge of horses, while he was aware that his father had always considered him the most trustworthy man and best worker in his employ. But Lossie's undeniable beauty had much more effect in determining his decision than any qualities her father possessed. In a year or two he thought that she might make a very pretty housekeeper to preside at the revels. His morals were never allowed to become a burden to him.

When he had finished his reverie he turned again to his correspondence, much to the disgust of the clerk, who had already been detained for three or four hours beyond his usual time for departure. But he was soon after released and Nicholas once more went on to the wharf. The barge was empty and rolling lazily on the rising tide. Lossie was leaning over the edge watching the eddies in the water and wondering how long it would be before Dalton got the card which one of the men who had come to assist in unloading the hay had posted for her.

"Well, Lossie," said Nicholas. "What do you think of London? Scarcely a place for dreams is it?"

The girl started at the sound of his voice. "It's very beautiful, sir."

"What? When you have seen as much of it as I have you will say it is infernally ugly."

"May-be I shall, sir, but just now with the red of the setting sun shining up from the river and the mist coming up from the bank there it looks just beautiful."

Ryeland laughed, the idea seemed quaint to him; he had never seen any beauty from Peter's Wharf. "You'll get over that, Lossie," he said. "Now tell me where your father is, I want to see if we can come to terms."

Philip was asleep in the cabin and appeared rubbing his eyes.

"Beg pardon, Measter Nicholas," he said. "I had just turned in vor a snooze."

"Well, I suppose you were up early enough to justify your doing so. I wouldn't have wakened you only I want you to look round before it gets dark."

They went first to the stables where a dozen big dray horses were munching contentedly in their stalls.

"Thee doesn't stint thee corn," remarked Philip.

Nicholas led the way to the warehouses. "You would have to go right through these every night, Grove. If you find a gas jet burning anywhere you will report to me in the morning. As you come out you will turn the gas off at the meter here. Lock the door and take the keys to your room."

"I 'ull be zhure to remember," said Philip scratching his head.

They reached the offices. "You would have to do exactly the same here, Grove, and here, too, Lossie's work would begin. She will have to sweep out the place and keep it tidy, and scrub it out once a week."

"Thur be-unt nothing as we-uns can't manage as yet," said Philip in a tone of relief.

"Well, there's not a great deal more, the rest of the work will be almost entirely yours," he said to the girl. "Come along and I will show you your quarters and introduce you to their present occupant. Her husband died quite recently and the firm are giving her a pension for the rest of her life."

"Main good on 'em," grunted Philip.

As they entered the house Nicholas shouted, "Mrs. Mavis, Mrs. Mavis".

A voice from the top storey quavered a feeble reply.

"You needn't come down," he replied. "I am bringing the new people to have a look at the place and we shall have to come to the top."

The staircase was badly lighted, and at one of the awkward turnings Lossie stumbled and would have fallen but for Nicholas thrusting out his arm. He caught her by the arm and retained his hold until they reached the first landing.

"You will be some little time getting used to this old-fashioned crib," he said as he relinquished his grasp.

The lightness of his tone reassured the girl as to a suspicion which had formed in her mind. The grasp of his hand on her arm had been a warm insistent pressure. It seemed to convey more than a desire to guide her safely.

"The rooms on this floor I occupy when I stay here for the night," he said throwing open a door. "Yes, come in and look round," as they hesitated to follow him. "I always require them to be kept clean and ready. Mrs. Mavis will show you exactly what I require. A pleasant look out, isn't it," he continued going to the window, "but your room above is even better than this, for instead of this bow window you have an open balcony where you will be able to sit with your needlework on summer afternoons. Come along up and look at it. I'm afraid," he remarked, "you will find Mrs. Mavis rather a melancholy companion while she is here, but she is old and cannot get over her loss."

"Poor thing," said Lossie.

The housekeeper stood at the door and bobbed deferentially as her employer made his appearance at the top of the stairs. She was tall, thin, angular and slightly bent. A tow-coloured blob of hair was coiled in a tight

knot on top of her head and upon it a crape bonnet seemed to rest casually.

"As you are not leaving until next Saturday, Mrs. Mavis," said Nicholas, "you will be able to show this young woman what there is to do. The place won't seem so lonely to you for the rest of the time with them about, will it?"

"The place is bound to seem lonely, sir. It can't never be the same place never no more since my old man——"

"There, there, that will do, my good woman," interrupted Nicholas hastily. "Come along, Grove. We'll leave your daughter here and go down to the office to see if my terms will suit."

Mrs. Mavis stood at the door until the men had reached the bottom of the stairs. Then closing it she turned, and Lossie was astounded at the change in the expression of her face. All the servility had faded out of it. "Damn him," she said fiercely. "Damn him!" Then she walked to where Lossie stood by the window and taking the girl by the shoulders turned her towards the light. "Ho! ho! ho!" she laughed, "So you are goin' ter take on the job of 'ousekeeper are yer?"

Lossie was so much amazed at the woman's manner that she could only answer with a simple affirmative.

The woman laughed again. "Take my tip an' git aht of it. You're too young, yer got a pretty face. Git aht of it before it's too late."

"Why?" queried Lossie.

"Why? 'Cos I tells yer to, that's why. Yer needn't stand starin' at me as if I was mad, though it's a wonder I ain't. Five an' twenty years 'ave I lived at the wharf an' I'm not mad at the end of it. When we came, my old man an' me, we was in the blessedness of youth an' thought as like enough you are thinkin', it was a grand openin'. Now I'm fifty an' look at me, an old woman. P'raps you thinks as a woman is old at fifty, but lor!

it ain't the years, it's the worry as done it. It was the same with my old man. Twenty-five years of Peter's Wharf an' these Medwins done for him an' he went and drowned hisself. They said as 'ow 'is death were a haccident. I knowed better. If we'd 'ad kids it might er been different but five an' twenty years of it, five an' twenty years——"

The sympathies of youth are quick. The tears started in Lossie's eyes but there were none in the furrows of the old woman's cheek.

"You are younger than I was when I came, years younger. All the worse for you. You're good-lookin' too, but what'll you be like in twenty years time."

"What did they do to you?" questioned the girl.

"Do? Nothin'. No, they let us alone. What should they do but just leave us to ourselves. You don't know what you are takin' on. But after you've lived alone in this old house by the river through a winter you'll know what I mean. There ain't nothin' to do but slave, slave, slave, from mornin' to night. My old man was 'appy enough at first, then he got low an' took to goin' to the Friar's 'Ead for a spell every night, an' as the years went on he was allus there. Then the young master noticed it an' said as if he didn't chuck it, he'd 'ave ter chuck him. An' ee tried, but what was the use, an' the young master see him a-comin' in a bit blind one night he'd been a-watchin' for him, an' the nex' mornin' he sends for him an' tells him he has ter go. So my old man falls into the river an' gets drowned an' they gives me a pension of five bob a week an' I blesses 'em fer kind Christian gentlemen, damn their eyes."

Her voice had gradually increased in volume and had covered the noise of footsteps on the stairs. As she finished the door opened and Philip entered with exultation showing in his eyes.

"We-uns be zettled at last, Lossie. Measter Nicholas

ee be a vine chap for zhure. Ee be g'wain' to start us at twenty-vive bob a week wi' lights an' coal an' rent vree. Ooray! I zes."

Lossie hardly knew whether to laugh or to cry. The widow's story filled her with foreboding, but her father's pleasure as well as the fulfilment of her own desire for a settled home seemed to be matter for rejoicing.

"You are quite sure you will be happy here, father?" she asked.

"'Appy as may vly," he answered, then turning to the old woman he continued: "Come, missus, if ee do-unt mind directin' I to th' pub I 'ull go vor a drop o' zummat vit to start ee zmlin'."

The three of them went downstairs together, and while the woman accompanied Philip to the entrance of the premises in Thames Street Lossie went again on to the wharf to take out some of their belongings from the cabin of the barge. She had gathered a bundle together and stayed for a moment at the stern of the barge looking westward.

A tall figure sculling hard shot through the arch of Blackfriars Bridge and, though she could not see his face as his back was towards the rosy light of sunset which still glowed through the arch, she thought she recognised the occupant of the light wherry. She was not mistaken. A moment later Frank Dalton's voice rang out cheerily.

"Well, Lossie, were you on the look-out for me?"

CHAPTER XVIII

DALTON had imagined that he had grown quite indifferent to the memory of Ruth Ryeland, but the chance meeting with the Groves revived the moody restless feeling which had taken hold of him when in reply to his earnest entreaty to be vouchsafed an answer to his letter he had received a mocking "farewell".

He had taken his fate very seriously. He had written the first few chapters of a novel full of Byronic despair and cheap cynicism. He had offered a number of verses couched in the same vein to numerous magazines until disappointed by their rejection he ceased to embody his woes in literary form. Whether he would have done so had he not been compelled to turn his attention to earning his own subsistence is another matter entirely. But when he had quarrelled with his father, for the sake of Ruth, the result had been exactly what he had anticipated. He had been told coldly that henceforth he would have to depend upon himself. At the time the problem seemed an easy one, and he was in so heroic a mood that he felt half inclined to refuse the cheque which his father offered him to tide him over the first few months. A little later, when he deemed he was forgotten by the girl for whose sake he had thrown away so many worldly advantages, he was glad that he had not done so. But he never thought for one instant of returning to his father's house and taking up the old life at the point where he had dropped it. For, though he had found it difficult to get a subsistence at first, yet he did at last manage to earn sufficient to supply himself with all the necessaries and some of the luxuries of

life. Like many another he had for long cherished the illusion that he would be able to earn a livelihood with his pen, and instead of following his father's advice to utilise part of the hundred pounds given him by booking a passage to Canada, he took instead a modest set of chambers in Barnard's Inn and furnished them partly with the contents of his own room at home which he removed without consulting anybody and partly at the expense of his stock of ready cash.

His first efforts in literature had been so uniformly rejected that at the end of six months he found himself with exactly a sovereign in hand and remunerative work just as far distant as at the beginning of the period. Not that he failed in energy. For eight or ten hours each day he had sat at his table grinding out essays, verses and stories on every subject which occurred to him. There was hardly a magazine in the United Kingdom whose editor had not contributed to his stock of formal "declined with thanks".

During this period of unprofitable endeavour he had made one or two acquaintances, and it was eventually through one of these that he found a way out of his difficulties.

Jack Edlan, the man who occupied the chambers on the opposite side of the staircase to Dalton's, was of a gregarious disposition and he soon succeeded in making the newcomer's acquaintance. He was two or three years older than Frank, and managed to earn his living by desultory use of his pencil. It was to him that Dalton confided his dilemma when he saw himself at the end of his resources.

"The devil!" was Edlan's remark. "I thought you were a millionaire, you seemed so indifferent to doing things that really pay."

"I may be a millionaire in embryo," was Frank's comment, "but I fancy I shall require a deuce of a lot of development."

"Let me see some of your stuff, my boy," said Edlan. "I might be able to tell you where to exchange it for the current coin of the realm."

"Look at as much of it as you like," replied Dalton with forced cheerfulness, as he emptied a drawerful of manuscript at Edlan's feet. "Not that—that's no use," he continued as his friend disinterred the first chapter of the unfinished novel from the heap.

"Smoke your pipe and interrupt me not," said Edlan. "An author is no judge of his own work."

Dalton settled down to smoke.

"How much is there of this altogether," Edlan asked at last.

"Six chapters, all about the same length. But what is the use——"

"Wait a moment, my youthful genius, and I will answer all your questions. How does this end?"

"It doesn't end," replied Frank moodily.

Edlan totted up the number of words on a page and made a rapid calculation. "One more chapter would be about the right length" he said.

"Right length for what, Jack?"

"Now listen to my words of wisdom," said Edlan. "Take your offspring and nourish him with adjectives. Introduce him to half the peerage. Let him be familiar with at least one duke, two duchesses and five earls. Then cut him up into twelve equal portions and let each portion end with a thrilling situation and you may sell the thing as a novelette for your neighbour's maid-servant to read when she is supposed to be in bed and will continue to read until she hears her mistress's foot-step on the stair and is compelled to end her guilty pleasure lest there shall come discovery that it is not the mouse which maketh such speedy end of the candles."

"I wish you would not talk rot," Dalton said.

"Truly, Frank," replied his friend, "I mean what I

say. If you can bring yourself to work this up a bit you can make it into a novelette that will sell. It's just the sort of stuff that goes down with the penny public and I can introduce you to the people who will buy it."

"I don't think I could," said Frank.

"Stuff," replied Edlan. "You want cash. Well, pocket your pride before hunger absolutely forces you to do so. I know it is unpleasant, I felt exactly the same as you do a few years ago. Now I draw horrors for penny dreadfuls and am only sorry I cannot get enough of the things to illustrate."

The advice was a bitter pill for Dalton to swallow, but he managed to get it down and the mouthful of jam in the shape of a cheque for ten guineas which he received upon the acceptance of his work was not ungrateful to his palate.

This was his entrance to his literary career, for the firm which had purchased the amended story were pleased enough with it to inform him that they were open to accept as many more as he liked to write so long as they were up to the same standard. He continued to write novelettes, for though there was not any fame to be gained, there was at least a living to be obtained and without any inordinate exertion. He could always get ten pounds for a story of from twenty to twenty-five thousand words, and a couple of hours a day devoted to work just enabled him to turn out a story once a fortnight. Under the circumstances he was in a fair way to drift into a thoroughly purposeless sort of life, anxious only for the day and the pleasures brought in its train. But the meeting with the labourer and his daughter awoke him from this mental state. That day at Graysbourne when there had first grown up in him the consciousness of manhood was recalled to his memory; stood out in vivid relief there; and with it the picture of the maiden who had awakened him to the consciousness. The thought made him dissatisfied with

the existence he was leading, and with his musings the thought of Lossie as she had been and as she was mingled very curiously. She was vastly altered. What was the change in himself?

He had been very quiet for the remainder of the day after they—it was Edlan who had been his companion—had left the Groves and he was still thoughtful when they were once more in his chambers upon their return to town.

Edlan was enthusiastic over the new acquaintance, and as was his wont let his tongue exhibit the trend of his thoughts. "What a model she would make, Frank," he declared. "Don't you think you could get her to sit to me. Her arms were ideal, and her figure—well, I could see that the curves must be very nearly perfect in spite of that shrunken old bodice she was wearing, perhaps because it was so very shrunken. You must get her to come here, old fellow. I'll furbish up my forgotten ambitions and have a shot for the Academy again. Make her something classic. I never had a really good model for the nude."

"Better not let her father hear you suggest anything of the sort," said Dalton knocking out his pipe. "They don't understand that sort of art in Gloucestershire villages, and I have seen him in a rage once in my life."

"That's beastly of him," continued Edlan. "But perhaps he is right, for the girl is pretty enough to tempt an archangel to sin, let alone mere mortals like ourselves."

"There's nothing remarkable about the girl," said Frank absently. He was thinking of Ruth.

"I'll be contented if I can paint her," continued Edlan, "as we first saw her, leaning against a truss of hay with her hair curling round her face, her blue eyes peeping out under the curls and her brown hand just dinting the curve of her brown cheek. Her lips alone are worth painting. I'm afraid, though, the hair will beat me.

However I could manage to get just that tint of gold, with as many lights in it as in the beechwoods in the autumn with the sun glinting back from every point, beats me."

"What a mad enthusiast you are," laughed Frank. "I don't believe she is half as pretty as your description of her would make her to be."

"Wait till you have seen her two or three times more," was the reply. "Your eye wants training. It doesn't pick up the detail half so quickly as mine. Did you notice what an admirable setting that weather-beaten blue serge made for her sunburnt skin."

"It was a very old frock. I think I shall make her a present of a new one," said Dalton.

"Base utilitarian," replied his friend. "It would not suit her half so well. That old frock was bleached to the very colour of her eyes, and there's not a new fabric in creation which would reproduce the colour. Besides, it was so thin that it allowed one to see her form. Some beastly new closely woven stuff would shut out even the glimpse of paradise."

"Shut up," said Dalton. "I've had quite enough of your raptures."

Nevertheless, after Edlan had retired to his own quarters the subject of the conversation refused to be dismissed from his mind, and when finally he retired to bed and fell asleep it was to dream of Lossie instead of Ruth.

On the following day he remained in his chambers working hard. His funds were getting low, and as it was not the practice of the firm for which he worked to advance cash on uncompleted work he had perforce to produce something. The memory of his meeting still haunted him to such an extent that after one or two attempts to follow out another idea he threw an uncompleted manuscript aside and started afresh. He made Lossie the heroine of the story and made her exile

from the village the commencement of a thrilling melodrama. He gave her two lovers, one all that was handsome and heroic and the other all that was treacherous and base. By night he had written two-thirds of the story and the next morning completed it by the foiling of the villain and the marriage of heroine and hero. Then with the MS. in his pocket he paid a visit to Messrs. Jones & Co.

The head of the firm greeted him affably. "'Aven't seen you for a fortnight, 'ave we, Mr. D.? I 'ope you 'aven't been goin' on the bust like most of our chaps has does the stories."

"No," said Dalton, "I've only been a little lazy, but I am hoping to make up for it by bringing you another before the week is out."

"Well, Mr. D., I think I can do with it. Stock's getting a bit low and that's a fact. We 'as to keep all our series agoin', you know."

"Exactly. Meanwhile, can you manage to let me have payment for this now," asked Frank. "I want the money particularly or I wouldn't bother you."

"It's against the rules, Mr. D., but let me 'ave a look at the Hem S." Mr. Jones was a kindly if somewhat illiterate man, and after turning over the pages and reading a paragraph here and there he remarked, "I think it's safe, so we'll say haccepted, Mr. D. Come along with me and I'll see that the cashier manages the business for you. I wouldn't 'ave done it for any of my other chaps. They'd sell me a pup as soon as look at me. I 'ave to read every word of their stories or, instead of givin' me real excitin' hincidents they copies pages of scenery out of the guide books or puts in 'ole pages of 'istry out of them moth-eaten authors what's buried in the Museum. I knows their tricks but they don't catch me. P'raps you'll be as bad when you gets a bit older, Mr. D.?"

"Well, if I do develop that form of vice, I won't try

it on you, Mr. Jones," replied Dalton. "It would be no use. You know too much."

Mr. Jones looked pleased at the flattery. "Best not, Mr. D. Best not. Give me haction and plenty of it. That's my motto."

"Give me cash and you shall have as much action as you like," replied Frank laughing.

"Ha! ha! ha!" Mr. Jones opened his mouth wide to laugh. They had reached the cashier's office and Frank was soon in possession of a cheque. He speedily made his way to a bank in Fleet Street where he changed it, and with the pleased feeling which comes to the Bohemian when he has a substantial lining to his pocket, he went and lunched. About five he found himself once more at Barnard's Inn, and he was still at home when the postman delivered Lossie's post card. It told him nothing but that the barge had arrived at Peter's Wharf, and being uncertain as to whether visitors to a mere bargeman would be welcomed there, he strolled down to the Temple Steps and hired a boat.

Thus it was that Lossie welcomed him once again on the barge.

"I hardly expected you so soon," she said with a swift blush as she took his hand.

"If I didn't come at once, heaven only knows where you might not have hidden yourselves," he answered. "You will hardly be staying here more than a day or two, I suppose?"

"I rather think we shall," replied the girl watching his face as she spoke and noting with delight his obvious pleasure at the news.

"That's a bit of luck," he commented. "Tell me all about it."

Lossie narrated the results of their meeting with Nicholas Ryeland. "So you see we shall be living here. I suppose that is good luck?" she concluded.

"Good luck? Of course it is," he answered. He

had been watching her closely as she told her story and had come to the conclusion that Edlan's estimate of her beauty had been right. She became conscious of his scrutiny at last and half-turned away.

"Excuse me, Lossie," he ventured. "It's rude of me to stare at you, but you remember the friend who was with me the other day when we met you on the river? He has been raving about your beauty ever since. He is a painter, you know, and he wanted me to ask you to let him put you in a picture."

"So you wanted to see whether I was worth it, Mr. Dalton. Well, look as long as you like." She faced him again, pouting her lips a little and looking boldly into his eyes. They were very near to each other and as their glances met the smouldering passion in each of their hearts leaped into flame. Their lips met.

Lossie shrank back at the warmth of the kiss. "Don't, Mr. Dalton."

"Not Mr. Dalton, Lossie. Frank."

Grove's voice came through the archway and they moved away from each other guiltily. "Be thee still in th' bo-at lass?"

Lossie replied readily enough. "Aye, father, and Mr. Dalton is here too."

"Then do ee bring un along wi' ee indoors, little-un," replied Philip as he made his appearance on the wharf. "I durzay as Mrs. Mavis 'ull make un welcome."

"Well, seein' as I'm leavin' an' you don't know the rules of the place I can't see why he shouldn't come," replied the widow who had followed Grove through the archway.

"I hope I haven't offended you, Lossie?" said Frank as they climbed the stairs.

A timid "No" was the only answer she gave as they reached the landing and then she ran lightly past him and entered the room. Dalton was left alone with Grove for a few minutes and heard the man's account of the good fortune which had befallen them.

"What are you going to do about furniture?" asked Dalton. "Does the firm supply it?"

Grove scratched his head and his face fell. "I 'ull be danged if I gave the matter a thought," he replied. "May be Measter Nicholas 'ull not take we-uns on if we ben't decent like."

"Perhaps I can be of some use to you after all," said Dalton, "but we will ask Mrs. Mavis first," as that lady entered the room followed by Lossie.

"And what might you be wantin' to ask Mrs. Mavis?" said the woman.

"Grove was just wondering whether the firm provided the furniture, Mrs. Mavis," explained Frank, "or whether it will be necessary for him to get his own things. I don't suppose you have much in the boat?" he added turning to Lossie.

"There was no room for anything," explained the girl.

"The firm don't supply you with nothin' for your own use, you may take your affydavy on that," said Mrs. Mavis. "Of course, there's the things used by the master when he stays the night and the chiny tea service for his tea in the afternoon an' his breakfast in the mornin' when needful, but there'd be a terrible row if you was caught makin' use of any of them for yourselves."

"It's lucky I have a little spare cash by me then," said Dalton to Grove. "I suppose," he continued turning to the housekeeper, "you will be taking all your things away with you."

"Some of 'em," replied the widow. "The linen an' the blankets an' the crockery an' pictures an' such like. But as for the rest, well, I'm goin' to my sister an' she 'as more furniture than she knows what to do with herself, so I 'ad a dealer in this blessed mornin'—two of 'em in fact—the thievin' villains. The first ee offers me three pound eight and a penny an' it 'ad cost us every ha'penny of twenty pound."

"You don't get much for second-hand furniture," said Dalton.

"But three pound eight and a penny, sir. I wouldn't listen to 'im at no price so I 'as in another an' he mounts up to four pound seven an' threepence. It's crool 'ard, but I s'pose I'll 'ave to haccept, seein' as I can't take it with me."

"We might be able to have a deal," said Dalton. "If you have a list of the things for Lossie to look at and see if they would suit."

"I've the list that the first man made out," said the woman. "Ee got that mad at 'avin' spent 'is mornin' batein' me down an' nothin' comin' of it all that he threw it in my face when ee went out."

Dalton took the list from her hand and read the contents aloud. There were sufficient articles to scantily furnish a couple of rooms, a bedroom and a kitchen. "Do you think you would be able to make shift with these for a day or two?" he asked of Lossie.

"I couldn't think——" began the girl. Dalton interrupted her quickly. "I'll give you four ten for the things as they stand, Mrs. Mavis."

"Well I don't see why you shouldn't 'ave them as well as the dealer," she remarked.

Dalton took some money from his pocket and counted out the amount on the table. "Now, if you'll make out a receipt to Grove, it will be all in order."

The woman laboriously wrote a receipt in the terms dictated by Dalton, and as soon as she had finished he handed it to Grove. "This is the first instalment of the debt I owe you."

"Zhure ee do-unt owe I nothin', zur," said the man in surprise.

"I think I do," was Frank's reply. "I fancy that I must have been responsible in some degree for your exile from Graysbourne. I still owe something to Lossie, but she will have to wait a week. You won't mind if I buy her a new frock, will you?"

"Oh! no, no, no," said the girl, the colour rushing to her cheeks. "You have done too much for us already."

"It be main kind of ee to remember we," said Grove slowly, "an' as for th' lass, she can plaze herself to be zhure."

"All right, I'll settle the matter with Lossie then," replied Dalton.

"Thankee kindly, zur," said Philip with an awkward bow. "I be-unt vool enow to refuse, whatever the lass does."

For a moment Lossie felt ashamed of her father. Why should he have accepted the gift so readily? Why should Frank—she whispered the name softly to herself—be so eager to place them under an obligation to him? She did not desire to look upon him as a benefactor. Her kisses were not to be bought. She would have felt much happier if he had been poor as themselves. She mused in silence while the bread and cheese were laid out on the table, and as soon as the frugal supper was finished the girl cleared away the food while Mrs. Mavis produced the glasses and set the kettle on to boil and Grove took from his pocket a pint bottle of rum, for beer had seemed to him not a sufficiently exhilarating beverage to do justice to the occasion.

Under the influence of the rum, Mrs. Mavis grew lachrymose, and when she insisted upon giving a history of her domestic calamities, Dalton grew impatient and, crossing the room, opened one of the windows and stepped on to the balcony. He turned towards the room again. "Lossie, come here," he said.

The girl still pondering the question she could not answer to her own satisfaction followed him unwillingly. Mrs. Mavis, having found a good listener in Grove, took no notice of their desertion.

"I envy you this balcony, Lossie," said Frank as the girl stepped out upon it. A full moon hung over the

river, and every vestige of filth and ugliness was hidden in the deep shadows. Where the light fell all was fair.

"There's nothing the matter with it," she answered somewhat sullenly.

Dalton noticed the tone. "What's the matter, Lossie? Haven't you forgiven me for stealing that kiss?"

The girl's trouble found expression. "It's not that, Mr. Dalton. I—I don't like you to be doing so much for us."

"You proud little beauty," laughed Frank.

"It's not pride but—you make me feel as if—as if you wanted to pay for my kisses." The trouble was out at last. A big tear gathered and rolled down the maiden's cheek.

Dalton took both her hands in his. "Don't think that of me, little-one. If you were to do so, I don't think I could bring myself to see you again."

He did not mean it, but with a curious desire to see whether the threat would produce any result he could not forbear making the experiment. He was sorry he had done so as he watched the girl's face in the moonlight. The big eyes, more full of trouble than ever, looked despondently into his, and he could see her bosom swelling with the sobs she strove to imprison there. He hastened to console her.

"You must think better of me than that, Lossie. I can do very little to right the wrong I have unconsciously done you both, and you must not let any such silly thoughts stand in the way of my doing what is in my power." He spoke gently to her in the same strain for some minutes, still holding her hands in his, and he soon soothed her into happiness. He even gained from her a promise that she would accept the gift he had offered, and then they went back to their elders.

The rum was finished. Philip nodded over his pipe though the widow still continued to recite from her book of lamentations. Dalton took his leave and Philip

accompanied him downstairs to the wharf. As he pulled out into the stream he instinctively cast a glance upwards. On the balcony he could see a slender, dark-garbed figure and a girl's pure profile silhouetted against the shadow.

"Good night, Lossie," he called.

Like the low warble of nightingale came the answer, "Good night".

When he got back to Barnard's Inn he thought long over the events of the evening. He felt that he had embarked upon a dangerous course both for Lossie and for himself. Lossie was but a child still—a transparently emotional child who made no effort to conceal the feeling which had been suddenly born in her heart towards him. But he could not analyse his own feelings towards her. The delight of the kiss she had given him still thrilled in his veins. He could not be unconscious that her beauty was the chief element in the interest which he had taken in her welfare, though he had endeavoured to persuade her otherwise. He knew that had Grove been alone he would never have made an effort to see him. He came to the conclusion before he retired to rest that it would be advisable to see but little of Lossie.

CHAPTER XIX

NEARLY a week passed before Dalton saw Lossie again, and the new life was so strange to the girl that she had little time to wonder why he had not been to see her. Every hour brought some new impression. The greatness of the city into which she had entered filled her mind with awe. Under the convoy of Mrs. Mavis she made her first acquaintance with the streets. The widow took her to the markets of the neighbourhood, to Billingsgate, to Smithfield and across the bridge to the Borough market. Even though Mrs. Mavis was a rather querulous companion, Lossie looked forward with dread to the time when she would have to do her shopping alone.

Grove took his new duties more calmly. He soon made new acquaintances, and found the Friar's Head a convenient place for the cementing of his friendships. He found that he had a good deal of time at his disposal, and so it happened that before the week had passed he was on friendly terms with half a dozen men who were wont to gather in the public-house bar.

Every day at one time or another Lossie had seen their employer. "He don't mean no good," commented Mrs. Mavis upon the fact. "I knows 'im, an' yer can take my word that ee'll not be satisfied till ee's spoiled yer pretty figure for yer. Men's all alike, an' I reckon it's your pretty face as done more for gettin' yer this billet than anythin'."

"That's all nonsense," Lossie had replied. "Besides, father is here to take care of me."

"That's all very well," commented the woman. "But,

father or no father, poor men's girls is made for rich men's sweethearts."

"I would never be sweetheart of his," said Lossie indignantly.

"What's the use of talkin'," replied the widow. "If it ain't 'im it'll be the t'other one what came to see yer in 'is boat. He's a gentleman too——"

Lossie took refuge from the old woman's tongue by flight, but she could not escape the mocking laugh which followed her, nor could she prevent Mrs. Mavis returning to the topic whenever they were together. It was therefore with a feeling of relief that at the end of the week she bade the widow farewell.

Mrs. Mavis departed tearfully, avowing that she would never be able to sleep out of sound of the big bell of St. Paul's. "For five an' twenty years," she averred, "I've counted the strokes of eleven an' before the 'um 'as died away I've slep. I shan't never get off without it."

When she had gone Nicholas Ryeland came up to their quarters and looked round. "Rather bare as yet, Lossie," he remarked.

"Yes, sir," she answered.

"I have ordered some new furniture to come in for my own rooms. You may as well have the old stuff up here and make the place comfortable," he said carelessly.

Lossie did not know what to say. It would be delightful to have so many nice things, but she remembered the remarks of Mrs. Mavis and wished that she could see how to avoid placing herself under an obligation. "I—I— It is too good of you," she stammered at last.

"Oh, there's no need to thank me. The furniture will keep better in your possession than in the lumber room."

"I don't know how I can thank you for what you have done, sir," replied the girl seriously.

"You can thank me very easily," he answered lightly. He was standing very near to her and he bent down and kissed her on the lips. "There the debt is paid in full, and you have given me the receipt."

She sprang away from him, her cheeks crimson. Nicholas laughed.

"You needn't be afraid, my dear. There's no harm in a kiss, is there? Now if you will come downstairs I will point out what I want removed."

The girl followed him ashamed and still fearful. He observed her expression with curiosity. He saw that he had alarmed her, and was both amused and surprised at the reception of his advances. To his mind he had done the girl an honour, and so far as his experience went, such advances were welcomed by girls in Lossie's position, even when they were not angled for. He was telling Lossie of his arrangements when Philip entered, and while informing him of the gift he had bestowed he watched the girl's face narrowly.

"It be main kind of ee, zur," said Grove.

Nicholas looked again at Lossie's face. It decided him in the opinion that trouble would be saved in the future if he told Philip of the payment he had exacted.

"You needn't trouble to thank me, Grove, the things are paid for," he said.

"Paid vor?" queried Philip in bewilderment.

"Yes," said Nicholas laughing. "I made Lossie give me a kiss for them. I did it to tease her, Grove, and I don't think she has quite forgiven me yet. She puts a high price on her kisses, you see."

Philip smiled expansively. "Gals 'as wunnerval ways," he said dogmatically. "Zometimes you kisses 'em an' they likes it, an' zometimes you kisses 'em an' they be like to bite thee 'ed off."

He dismissed the subject from his mind, but when Nicholas had left them Lossie referred again to the matter.

"I don't half like Mr. Nicholas making so free, father," she said.

"Thee bist talkin' nonsense," he answered roughly. "Zhure, thee ben't a vine lady vor ee to be so particular as to oo kisses ee. I reckon Measter Nicholas be as vree to kiss ee as Measter Dalton an' I zeed un do it vor zartain."

Lossie's colour rose. She could see that her father had been drinking, and knew it would be useless to argue with him. She made no reply, and Philip continued:—

"I be-unt g'wain' to 'ave ee stand in my way wi' thee vine lady notions, zo I tells ee straight. Measter Nicholas be a good un' an' there be-unt no 'arm in 'is kissin' ee."

All at once life seemed very hard to the girl. She had expected her father to stand by her. Though struggling her hardest, her sobs would win the mastery. Her weeping brought her father to a more reasonable frame of mind. He always had to be very drunk before he could resist his daughter's tears.

"Thur, now, cheer up, little-un. Thur ben't no 'arm done. I be zeein' after that. Philip Grove ben't the man to zee 'is own vlesh an' blood hurted. Now do ee go out an' do thee zhoppin' whiles I zees to the movin' of the things upstairs."

Philip handed her a sovereign. "Zummat nice vor our virst Zunday dinner in the wharf."

Lossie donned her shabby straw hat and went out into the streets. For the first time she regretted that Mrs. Mavis had departed. Never in the deepest solitude of the country had she felt so much alone as she did amongst the crowds that thronged the streets. Amongst all these hurrying people there was not one whom she might call friend. Then she met Frank Dalton.

She was just at the corner of St. Paul's Churchyard

when he caught sight of her downcast face. She did not see him, and his voice asking, "Why so sorrowful, Lottie?" was the first hint she had of his approach.

Her face flushed and her eyes brightened instantaneously. There was unfeigned delight too in the tone of her voice as she exclaimed, "Mr. Dalton!"

It pleased him to see that his presence should work such a transformation in her appearance, and he regretted that he should have remained away so long.

"I was feeling so very lonely," she explained. "Mrs. Mavis went away and I have come out alone for the first time."

"Let me come marketing with you," he said as he caught sight of the basket she carried. He turned to walk beside her, but she hesitated, looking down at her old frock and then at his well-fitting clothes. "I'm too shabby," she said.

In reply Dalton laughed so cheerily that one or two bystanders turned and smiled responsively. "Nonsense, Lottie. Let me take the basket."

He chattered away so brightly that she soon recovered her usual cheerfulness, and when he left her at the door of the house at Peter's Wharf he promised to call for her in a boat on the following afternoon. She sang all the rest of the day and right through the Sunday until Dalton redeemed his promise. In the morning she had brushed and darned her old frock, but try as she would she could not shut her eyes to the fact that it was very old. Yet she forgot all about it when she saw him from the balcony shoot the arches of Blackfriars Bridge. Philip was drowsing in an arm-chair after a heavy dinner, and paid no heed to her departure.

She was very merry all the way up to Battersea. They both had a good deal to say to each other, but it was not until they turned the boat and drifted down with the tide that the conversation became intimate. Then Dalton once more strove to get a promise from

the girl that she would accept a new dress from him. She tried to put him off again, but he would not be denied.

"It's no use, Lossie," he declared at last, "you must have some decent clothes, if it is only to wear when you come out with me. I know you were feeling awkward yesterday, now weren't you?"

She had to confess the truth of his surmise.

"Well, then, it is bound to be some time before you will be able to afford the sort of frock you ought to have, even if you knew how to get it for yourself. So I have made arrangements for you. You are to come up to my place one morning this next week and I have arranged with the woman who looks after my rooms to go with you and see that you are not swindled."

"Indeed I would rather wait until I can get the things for myself," said Lossie earnestly.

"Well, I'm not going to wait till then," replied Frank. "And I wish you wouldn't call me Mr. Dalton. Why not Frank?"

They were drifting past Westminster and the quiet of the Sabbath hung over the river. Lossie made no answer but a blush. Dalton again pressed his point.

"I know what your father's wages are, and I am quite sure though you are a careful little soul it will be months before you will be able to replace that frock with a new one. I noticed that when you turned round just now the seam began to split. Look!"

"I've grown so fast the last year," she said blushing a deeper red, "that my clothes are too small."

"What time on Tuesday shall I meet you?" persisted Frank.

Lossie gave way and arranged to meet him at nine o'clock in the morning at the corner of St. Paul's Churchyard before they once more reached the wharf. Then as they landed a disaster befell Lossie's frock which seemed expressly intended to abet Dalton in his design.

As Dalton grasped the girl's hand to help her ashore the boat swung out into the stream, and as she sprang the strain on the old fabric of the bodice proved too great for its strength. The bodice split from collar to waistband. The girl's face glowed with shame that her companion should see that she was wearing nothing beneath the torn garment. Dalton did violence to a sudden desire to take the girl in his arms and press his lips against the soft flesh. In the most matter of fact tone he remarked, "There, you see how it is, let me pin up the tear for you." His fingers trembled as he performed the self-imposed task, but he gave not the slightest hint of the passion which leaped up in him. As for Lossie she could have thrown her arms round him and kissed him. He had dealt with her as courteously as if she had been his sister.

"You are very good to me—Frank." The last word came to her lips hesitatingly, but he had been so delicate in his attention that she felt she could not do less than carry out his desires.

He went up to their apartments and stayed to drink tea, talking with Philip over old times at Graysbourne, and recalling the inhabitants and scenes of the valley. Dusk came on and Grove, growing restless, expressed his intention of going out for a stroll. Lossie asked that she might accompany him, and when he bade her remain at home strove further to persuade him to stay at home too. But her persuasions were useless.

When he had gone the two went out on to the balcony. A soft breeze rippled the girl's hair and bore a sigh from her lips.

"Why the sigh, Lossie?" asked Frank.

"It's father. He is getting back into his old habits and it makes me afraid to see him."

"What old habits, Lossie?"

She told him of Philip's addiction to drink since they had begun their roaming existence, though she said

nothing of the outrage which had resulted therefrom. That was a matter she could not think of without a shudder and a feeling of shame.

Dalton strove to make her take a cheerful view of things but he hardly succeeded. "Whatever befalls, I want you to remember that you always have me," he said at last. He placed his own hand upon the little sunburned hand which lay on the wooden rail beside him.

She did not withdraw it. The sun had set. The clusters of lamps on the bridges began to throw long golden reflections on the water. The melancholy wail of a syren came up from the pool.

"Sighing again, Lossie?" he said.

"Yes, Frank." She could syllable his name more boldly in the twilight." I shall not always have you to depend on. Some one else will claim your attention. Some one better than a poor labourer's daughter."

"Lossie?"

"Have you forgotten Miss Ruth?"

He was not prepared for the question and for a moment was at a loss for an answer. Then he said, "She is as dead to me, Lossie".

"Maybe, but you have not forgotten."

"Listen, Lossie," he said earnestly. "If I met Ruth Ryeland to-morrow in the street I would pass her without a glance of recognition. For her sake I gave up wealth, position and all the luxuries that they could secure to me, and for reward she cast me off like an old glove. The only reason so far as I can see was that I was no longer the rich suitor she sought. You would never have treated me so Lossie—dear?"

"I? Oh, never, never!" The answer was quite involuntary, and through the gathering darkness her eyes sparkled with the soft lustre of tears. His hand tightened upon hers and gently she yielded as he drew her toward him. Their lips met and at that moment Lossie

became a woman, for knowledge came to her of a new-born passion.

They spoke little as they stood on the balcony in the darkness with the river swirling away at their feet. Lossie was quite content to feel the pressure of his arm about her waist and respond to the caress of his lips and Dalton—well, Frank Dalton was struggling against the fascination which the girl's fresh young beauty had for him. He knew that his lips had framed a lie, that he was not wholly indifferent to his old love, that the presence of Ruth, an explanation of her silence, would break down the barrier his pride had erected. He knew that he was acting the part of a traitor in winning Lossie's love, yet he could not bring himself to tear himself away from her.

Presently the big bell of St. Paul's boomed out ten. Lossie awoke from her love reverie with a sigh. "Father will be back directly. I must get supper ready for him," she said. She entered the room and lighted the lamp.

Dalton remained alone on the balcony, and when he rejoined her he was more collected than when he had felt the tremulous pressure of her hand within his own palm and her lips had responded so readily to his kisses. But he said nothing which would have led Lossie to doubt his love for her, and presently they heard Grove's step upon the stair. He did not wish to remain and face Philip. "I must be going dear. Good-bye."

She looked brightly and frankly into his eyes. "Good-bye, Frank, till Tuesday."

They kissed and parted.

CHAPTER XX

ALL through Monday Dalton's desires were in conflict with his sense of duty. Ninety-nine times he determined to see no more of Lossie, but at the hundredth he concluded that there could be no harm in fulfilling the promise he had made. So on the Tuesday morning he took his hat and went to meet her at the appointed place just as the crowd was pouring into the city to the daily task in warehouse and office.

Lossie was awaiting him, and the look of delight which came into her face as she caught sight of him swept away his determination that this was to be the last occasion of their meeting.

"I am free for two or three hours," she told him as she turned to walk beside him. "I was up at five to get through my work so that I might be ready."

"That ought to be time enough for you to do your shopping and come back to pour out coffee for my breakfast afterwards," he replied.

"What! Haven't you breakfasted yet?" asked the girl in amazement.

"Not I, Lossie. The old country habits don't fit into town life. I suppose that you will be taking breakfast at eleven one of these days."

She dissented vigorously as they crossed Ludgate Circus and walked up Bride Street into Holborn. He walked quickly, for he was just a little ashamed of the shabbiness of his companion's appearance and more ashamed that such a thought should have entered his mind. He tried to stifle the feeling under a flood of talk and told the girl of the arrangements he had made.

"My laundress, Mrs. Wilcox, is waiting for us," he said. "She's a funny little woman. About fifty, no, forty is nearer the mark. She has black hair, beady little eyes, and is nearly as wide as she is high. She hasn't a particle of respect for any one, but she looks after my place admirably. I've had her to see to my rooms for eighteen months and I wouldn't change her for untold gold. If she hadn't turned up when she did I should have given up seeking any one in sheer disgust. In one week I had tried four different women. That was before she applied for the job. One I found lying on the floor when I came home with an empty whisky bottle beside her. The next disappeared with the sheets, and the other two—well, their honesty was as indubitable as their uncleanliness."

"But Mrs. Wilcox?" asked Lossie. She was a little envious of the paragon.

"Wait till you see the great Pollie," he continued. "You would never guess that she had been in the ballet before she married a cabman and became the mother of five. I doubt if you will be able to understand half she says, but—here we are."

They entered the stone-paved courtyard of the little inn, and Dalton led the way up the dingy staircase. "Let me introduce you to Mrs. Pollie Wilcox," he said as they entered his chambers.

The woman was standing in the tiny hall with a broom in one hand, and Lossie winced under her sharp-eyed scrutiny.

"Do for the front row," she remarked approvingly, "though a bit innercent for the boards."

"Get out of it," replied Frank. "I'm not an agent."

"Yer won't be makin' love ter yer pore old Pollie if she comes ter see yer often," she continued, wiping an imaginary tear from her eye with the corner of her apron.

"Go along with you, Pollie, and fulfil your mission," said Dalton.

"Chucked again," remarked the laundress, pirouetting on one toe and closing the figure with a kick. "What d'yer think o' that for the mother of five," she said calmly to the astonished girl. "Now, come along, my innercent," and before Lossie could answer she found herself on the stairs and Frank out of sight behind the closed door. "You'll get used to my ways," she explained. "You see, I was born with legs an' can no more 'elp kickin' now than when I was a baby, but if ever yer wants a friend, yer won't 'ave ter look farther than Pollie Wilcox."

Lossie could not see the relevance of her companion's remarks, but she could appreciate the kindness which prompted the latter part of the speech and acknowledged it with tears in her eyes.

"Bless you, my lamb," Pollie replied. "I didn't know what to think when Mr. Dalton asts me to git yer an outfit—but 'e's a queer cuss in some of 'is ways, an' I thought as 'ow it might be a bit of awright. First I ups an' asts 'im, 'Wort d'yer tike me for?' But 'e tells me all about yer, an' now I seen yer—well, I knows what 'e's a thinkin' of when 'e wants ter see yer rigged out a bit smart. 'She's a beauty, an' no mistake,' says 'e, an' 'e's right, but I reckon yer ain't nothin' to what yer will be when I've done with yer."

Lossie blushed at the compliment, and her companion paused in the middle of the pavement to laugh. "I thought there wasn't a blush left in the universe, my poppy, but there's strange things brought up from the country sometimes."

"Not half so queer as the things they grow in town," replied Lossie.

"Good fer you, my daisy," replied Pollie. "You'll do. But to git back to the point. Mr. Dalton, 'e says, 'Buy 'er somethink ladylike an' quiet,' drat 'im. If 'e'd only left it ter me 'alf the town would be turnin' ter look after yer when yer went out on Sundays."

"I should hate for people to turn to look after me," said Lossie energetically. "I—I only want Fr—Mr. Dalton not to be ashamed of me."

"Jesso, my pansy face, though if I was Fr—Mr. Dalton"—she mimicked Lossie's hesitance perfectly—"I guess I'd not be ashamed of bein' seen with yer whatever frock yer wore. Not that I suppose 'e is. 'E ain't a bad sort, 'e ain't."

"He's been very good to me," said Lossie.

"I don't think there's much to wonder at in that," replied the woman. "If I were a man I'd do the same. But 'e's as good as they're made, my rosebud. He'll stick to yer right enough, even if 'e don't marry yer. I 'aven't done fer 'im fer eighteen months without knowin' somethin' about 'im. 'E's a long sight better'n most o' the gents as I does fer. It ain't empty whisky bottles an' broken glasses an' 'airpins on the floor an' a note on the table, 'Breakfus fer two,' every Saturday night like most of 'em. Er course, it's been so once or twice, but then men is men an' what can yer expect." She chattered away heedless that the girl only half-comprehended her. "Even if 'e'd been the same as the rest I wouldn't say a word agin 'im. When I was on my back with the last little Wilcox, blow me if 'e didn't brass up fer the doctor and spring two quid besides fer the baby-clothes, so 'e said, knowin' my old man 'adn't 'ad a good time with 'is keb that winter. An' now 'ere we are."

They paused at the doors of a large draper's shop, and a few minutes later Lossie was being initiated into the mysteries of London shopping.

Two hours afterwards they reappeared in the streets heavily laden with parcels, and Pollie exclaimed triumphantly, "If it 'adn't 'appened ter be sale week yer wouldn't 'ave been arf the lidy yer will be before the mornin' is out."

When a few minutes later they re-entered the

chambers they found Dalton walking up and down impatiently.

"I'll be hanged if I will ever let you take Lossie shopping again, Pollie," he remarked. "I could have bought up half Oxford Street in a quarter of the time."

"Not with a tenner," replied the woman. "But I reckon it is a bit past yer breakfus time an' there's nothin' makes the time pass so slow as waitin' fer a meal. However, yer'll 'ave to stay yer stommick with a crust er bread fer I'm blessed if I does anythink else till I've fitted out this bit o' mayblossom in 'er noo frills. Come along into the bedroom, my wallflower, an' try on the trousseau. Meanwhiles, if yer can wait ten minutes or so, yer might look at the bill an' see that yer old Pollie 'asn't cheated yer out of any of yer splosh as well as keepin' yer waitin' fer yer breakfus'."

Dalton laughed as he took the bill and the door of the bedroom was closed in his face. Lossie strove against the elder woman's impetuosity. But Pollie Wilcox insisted upon having her own way. "I've bought the feathers, my birdie, an' I'm a goin' ter tog yer out in 'em, strite." She threw a towel over the mirror as she spoke. "Now off with the old year an' on with the new. Not a glimpse of yerself will yer see till I've finished."

Lossie flushed but she still hesitated. Pollie saw the hesitation and understood the reason. She went to the girl and unbuttoned her bodice.

"You mustn't mind an old woman like me, my red red rose," she said. "I know what it is to be 'ard up. Many's the time when you could a seen my lily skin a peepin' through the cracks in my gown, which ain't surprisin' when the whole er yer what-d'yer-may-call-'ems as gone ter yer uncle's."

Lossie submitted, and soon had her reward, for the deft hands of her companion relieved her of the patch-work which had done duty for her undergarments and,

while wrapping her in new linen, kept her attention constantly occupied with naïve remarks. She was dressed at last, and when Pollie pronounced she would do she made a step towards the door.

“Half a minute, my stephanotis,” exclaimed Pollie. “I’ll just fix your hair an’ then you shall break like an astonished vision on the ’ero’s wonderin’ sight.”

While the brush was at work Lossie had an opportunity of looking around her. The room charmed her. It was oak panelled like the other, its latticed window reminding her of the home of her childhood. That seemed very far away now. Unconsciously her hand smoothed the fabric of her dress. She was a very different being to the child who had gone out from Graysbourne hand in hand with her father. Alas, he had changed too. She put the thought away from her and at the moment Pollie Wilcox laid down the comb and took the towel from the mirror.

“Now my Queen of the May, what d’yer think er yerself?”

The colour rushed to Lossie’s cheeks and she caught her breath. “Is that me?” she asked wonderingly. She would not have recognised the slender figure in its simple white blouse and skirt of dark blue serge for the girl who had entered the room in the threadbare and patched garments now thrown carelessly in a corner. Cinderella could not have been more astonished. Mrs. Wilcox did not allow her much time to analyse her thoughts.

“Come, my beauty, the ’ero ’ungers for the sight of yer an’ ’is breakfus’,” she remarked, and throwing open the door she ushered her charge into the adjoining room. Dalton came forward to meet her and in one moment Lossie learned in the compelled admiration of his glance the value of dress. Pollie had performed her task well. The beggar girl had become a princess.

“I hardly know you, Lossie,” said Frank.

"I am really exactly the same," she answered. He could not resist the sweetness of her upward look. He caught her in his arms and kissed her.

Pollie sprang on to a chair beside them, and extending her arms, remarked solemnly, "Bless you, my children," and when they had done laughing they sat down and breakfasted together with Pollie to wait on them and to make remarks which were not so obscure but that they more than once brought the colour to Lossie's cheek.

Breakfast finished, Pollie accompanied the girl back to the wharf to help her carry the parcels, for though Frank's gift as purchased by Pollie had been inexpensive it had been complete. But when she was alone the girl hastened to exchange the new for the old gown. She was afraid that her father would think that she was too much of a fine lady.

CHAPTER XXI

THE summer—the same summer which had brought Lossie and Frank Dalton together—waned into autumn while the Reverend Robert Rawlins set himself seriously to his wooing. He was so constantly at the farm that his object could not be open to misconception. The farmer and his wife grew quite elated at the idea of their daughter occupying the proud position of the wife of the rector of the parish, and Ruth was compelled to suffer many reproaches as the result of her uniform coldness towards her suitor. She noted with dismay that the only notice he took of her marked expression of dislike was to redouble his attentions, but she consoled herself with the thought that so soon as he made her a formal offer of marriage she would be able to get rid of him once and for all.

The opportunity which he sought and she welcomed came one day at the end of July. He happened to call when Ruth was alone in the farmhouse. Instinctively she made an ineffectual effort to prevent the declaration but ultimately realised that it would be better to allow it to proceed. So she listened for awhile in silence while the Reverend Robert pleaded his passion in nicely turned periods delivered with a sermonic intonation. When she tired of listening she stopped him with an intimation that her mind was already made up. He made as if to kiss her, whereupon she said sharply, "If you had an ounce of prescience you would have discovered that you have fallen into an error—surely you cannot think that your presence is other than distasteful to me?"

He would not accept the rebuff. "What have I done," he asked, "that you should think so ill of me?"

You cannot know how deeply I—I love you.” The air of injured innocence sat bravely upon him as he framed the question.

Ruth at first answered “nothing”. But as she answered there came to her mind the day when meeting him at the stile she had fled from him and she reminded him of the occurrence.

He was in no wise taken aback. He replied talking freely and frankly. “Yes, yes. You had cause to complain, but I am only a man and I confess I was carried away by the sight of your beauty. But I have atoned for it. As a penance I determined to hold myself aloof from you for a couple of years. I banished myself from your presence. I hardly let myself speak to you, though day in and day out my love tore at my heart. I schooled myself to give no sign of it. That was my punishment and it was only my love for you which enabled me to bear it. Cannot you believe that I have suffered, that my long silence is an additional proof of my earnestness when I offer you my life?”

He meant every word which he uttered and had Ruth, as he expected, fallen—metaphorically—at his feet, he might have proved as good as his word. Instead she answered coldly, the scorn in her face unfading:—

“I do not desire your life any more than I desire your love, Mr. Rawlins.”

His mood changed. “I shall not accept that answer, Ruth.”

She made a gesture of annoyance as he gave her name utterance, but he merely smiled.

“Ruth you will be to me in the future so I may as well use you to hearing your name on my lips.”

He came more closely to her and took her hand. She had risen and faced him unflinchingly now that the hour had come.

“Listen to me now.”

He spoke deliberately and with intense passion.

“I mean to marry you whether you wish it or not.

There is nothing in heaven or on earth shall come between me and my desire."

"You forget," she replied, "that there must needs be two parties to the agreement and that my consent you will never win."

He laughed long and quietly, still holding her hand, and it was at this moment that Mrs. Ryeland happened to pass the window and glancing in saw the girl's embarrassed face. Her mind jumped to the conclusion that the end she had so much desired was approaching. "He must have proposed," she told herself and went slowly round to the door. Before she entered Ruth had thrown off the Reverend Robert's grasp and made her escape. She met her mother in the passage and flew to the maternal arms for comfort.

"I said to your father that it was coming, but I didn't think he would have spoken so soon. I am glad, Ruthie, very glad," she whispered.

"Mother, don't. I can never marry him," said her daughter.

"There, there. It's taken you by surprise. All girls feel like that at first. But it's a good match for you, dearie."

"Mother, don't speak of it like that. I—I—" The tears came to her eyes at the thought that this was all the consolation she would receive. She left the maternal arms and rushed to hide herself away in her own room. Mrs. Ryeland entered the room where Rawlins awaited her, bland and smiling.

"Ruth seems to have run away from you, Mr. Rawlins," she remarked.

The clergyman made a solemn reply. "My dear Mrs. Ryeland, I have had the honour of making your daughter a proposal of marriage."

"Well?" There was a world of anxiety in the matron's query.

"I think—ah—that I must have taken her wholly by surprise for she was—ah—too much agitated to give me a definite answer."

"Ah, yes," said Mrs. Ryeland. "I can quite understand how she must have felt at receiving such an offer from her rector. She may have doubted whether she would be able to take up the work——"

"No doubt," replied Rawlins gravely, "and perhaps I may have been a little premature but, thrown as I have been lately, into close companionship with your family, I could not remain blind to the fact that nowhere else in the world should I be likely to find a real helpmeet in the truest sense of the word. No one could be blind to your daughter's manifold excellences and when the chance offered I could no longer keep silence. I am only too glad to think that Ruth gave me to understand that she was not wholly indifferent as regards me."

"I should think not, indeed," said Mrs. Ryeland. "It is my belief that the girl thinks of you from morning to night. But she is a very conscientious girl and she may have doubts as to whether she would be able to do her duty in the position she would occupy as your wife." Mrs. Ryeland might have gone on interminably but the rector checked her.

"It is the diffidence of a really fine nature. May I ask you to speak to Mr. Ryeland of this matter? I would remain myself but I feel that I am agitated and shall be glad to be alone for awhile." He shook hands solemnly, saying as he departed, "Will you tell Ruth that I shall hope to call upon her to-morrow afternoon?"

Meanwhile, Ruth was debating with herself what course to pursue. She knew that if she kept to her refusal life would become unbearable. The maternal wishes and the paternal desires would both be arrayed against her and she had no one to turn to for support against this family influence. If only Frank had been true to her and his promise. But he had forgotten her and there was no one. Tears came to her relief at this final thought though her nature rebelled at the weakness. She became more calm after her quiet cry and much more able to consider the best course to adopt.

She came to the conclusion ultimately that it would be best for her to temporise. Perhaps her suitor would no longer press his suit if he saw that there was no chance of his winning any return for the affection he professed to entertain for her, and at anyrate she would postpone the reproaches of the family for a season.

The supper hour had arrived by the time she had come to this conclusion, and slightly paler than usual she went down to the evening meal. As she entered the dining-room her father rose from his seat and kissed her. "Been dreaming, eh, lass? Well, well, love-dreams are all very well in their way," he said. "So my bonnie Ruth is going to be the rector's wife. You'll make me a proud father, my girl."

She hardly knew what to reply. She had not expected that her acceptance of the proposal should have been taken for granted in this way. Surely Rawlins had not dared to say that his suit had been accepted. Forgetful of her recent decision to temporise she exclaimed vehemently, "No, no. I didn't say I would marry him. I don't want to marry anyone, father."

Farmer Ryeland laughed. "Your mother said the same thing to me more than once and I knew what it meant. I think we may look upon it as settled that you can marry the rector if you like and a daughter of mine is not going to be so foolish as to refuse an offer like that."

Ruth winced, but she saw the futility of arguing the matter. Her father would never understand how she could view such a match with aversion. Besides she was always diffident of discussing with him any matter affecting the emotions. He did not understand them. So she made no answer save that she had decided nothing. Unfortunately, however, this policy was looked upon as a tacit acceptance, and each day Ruth found herself more tightly enveloped in the toils. Although she denied it, it was an accepted fact in the family circle that she was engaged to the rector and before long the news leaked out in the village. She

knew of it by the more subtle obsequiousness in the salutations of the villagers and fancied she heard them commenting upon her looks when she had passed. This was hard enough to bear but the effect in her own home was worse. By common consent she was relieved of every bit of drudgery of the daily toil which hitherto had fallen to her share. "The rector's wife will be a lady," said her mother with the middle class idea that the "lady" should busy herself with no task necessitating honest hand labour. Every day, too, the Reverend Robert Rawlins would call at the farm and she could frame no sufficient excuse for refusing to meet him. So a month swept by and then Ruth seeing that her suitor still persisted in his wooing appealed to her father to put an end to the matter. She did not make a second attempt.

Though she had broached the subject at one of his sunniest moments, when he was contentedly smoking his after-dinner pipe, Ryeland laid down his pipe and hurled half a dozen vigorous expletives into the vanishing rings of smoke.

"What, not marry him? After carrying on as you have done for all these weeks and telling him that you cared for him——"

"I never even pretended to care for him," declared the girl.

"Not pretended? Why, haven't I seen you day after day and night after night sitting with him in the parlour as close as you please, seen you with my own eyes? Why you will be telling me that it is winter instead of summer next."

"It is not true," she cried. "I have always said I hated him. It is all of you who have tried to make yourselves believe that I have encouraged him."

"I can believe my own eyes, can't I?" asked the farmer. "If you hated him, why didn't you send him about his business at the first. No, it is too late for girl o' mine to back out of her promise in this way." Then he read her a lecture on her foolishness in con-

templating the refusal of such an offer, pointing out that she was never likely ever again to be in the position to accept so much wealth and comfort and bade her go and talk to her mother. But Ruth found no more comfort there. Mrs. Ryeland was as much dazzled by the position of her prospective son-in-law as her husband was by his possessions. Ruth realised that she must appeal to the rector himself to put an end to the persecution.

She tried to hint to him her wish that he would cease to call at the farmhouse but he proved impervious to hints. She next blankly refused to recognise him when he entered the family circle, but this attitude only brought chidings from her mother and angry scoldings from her father. As for Rawlins he apparently took no more notice of her objections than he would have done of the wayward caprices of a child. In fact, when once her father had rebuked her for an intentional discourtesy he had even made excuse for her.

"My dear Ryeland," he remarked, "I appreciate these fancies at their true value. Women know how they enhance their value to us by their assumption of disdain, and if your daughter were less a woman may-be I should not admire her so much."

The farmer was filled with astonishment at the long-suffering spirit displayed by his daughter's suitor. His own methods would have been very different, and he could only account for the cleric's attitude by reason of his vocation. Ruth heard the excuse, and though her lip curled with scorn she shuddered as she recognised her suitor's persistence. For the first time she began to fear that he would win. On the night following she let her thoughts turn again to the youth to whom had gone out the virgin sweetness of her heart and throughout the dark hours she tossed moaning "Frank, Frank, why have you forgotten me?" There was no answer, and tears would not come to her relief.

It was after this night of pain that the thought came

to her that she would write to her suitor, and in the early light of dawn she carried out her intention. Later she sent the missive to the rectory and the Reverend Robert received it as he sat at lunch and smiled grimly as he read it.

"Dear sir," she had written, "more than a month has now elapsed since you commenced to force your attentions upon me. I have striven by every means in my power to show you how unwelcome such attentions are but you still persist in them. It is for this reason that I am writing to ask you to take this letter as final--so that you may no longer find an excuse for presuming upon the complaisance of my parents to force your presence upon me. Perhaps it will help you to come to a decision to respect my wishes if I tell you what I have never yet breathed to a living soul, namely, that long ago I gave myself entirely to another and that it is beyond your power to replace his image in my heart.—I am, in all sincerity, Ruth Ryeland."

When penning this letter, Ruth Ryeland had never imagined that her metaphorical allusion to her love could be translated literally in a manner terribly destructive to maidenly pride. Nor at first did the reverend gentleman to whom it was addressed so interpret it. But when the significance of the final phrases came home to his understanding he began to see his way out of a situation which even to him was becoming unbearable. After a little consideration he penned an answer.

"My dear Miss Ryeland,—I hasten to acknowledge the receipt of your note, though I must confess that I had hoped that it would contain a kinder message. I cannot, however, acquiesce in your decision without some few minutes' conversation with you. Will you do me at least one favour and call here to-morrow morning? I want to show you the home in which you would be mistress if I could prevail upon you to reconsider your decision. If you will gratify me in this and if I cannot induce you to change your mind I promise you I will

faithfully abide your decision.— Ever yours, Robert Rawlins.”

He smiled as he read the letter, rang the bell and ordered his cob to be harnessed and the groom to be ready to accompany him to the market town. On the way he delivered the note at the farmhouse.

“Tell Ruth,” he said to Mrs. Ryeland, “that I have to go into town on business to-day; this note will explain to her.”

When Ruth read the letter she could have shouted aloud with delight. She read into his desire to see her at the rectory merely an attempt to make her change her mind by the sight of the luxuries of which she had heard though she had never seen. She was quite convinced that nothing could alter her determination, least of all material arguments such as were foreshadowed. That evening she was in high spirits and her father remarked upon the change.

“Seems you’ve lost the vapours at last, my lass. I was thinking it was time you began to settle down to the thoughts of the wedding.”

She did not enlighten him as to the cause of the flight of her melancholy. There was plenty of time for that. It was no use anticipating the parental storm which she knew she would have to face. She felt she could endure a great deal when once her suitor had departed.

Ruth might have felt less easy had she followed the rector to the little country town. He drove straight to a jeweller’s shop.

“Yes, sir, your order is completed,” was the jeweller’s answer to his inquiry, and turning to a safe he took from one of the drawers a case containing a ring and another with a bracelet. “Very pretty they are, too,” he continued, “though it was with the utmost difficulty that I could get your instructions executed. The spring is hardly jewellers’ work, you know, sir.”

Rawlins took up the ring. It had a heart-shaped boss of diamonds grasped by two diamond claws,

and at the point of each claw a ruby glistened. He contemplated it with satisfaction. "I wonder if you will appreciate the metaphor, my bonnie Ruth," he murmured softly, then turning to the shopman said, "Show me the bracelet".

The man took up the bracelet, a broad heavy fetter of gold. "The catch was made by a first class locksmith, sir," he said, "and I defy anyone not acquainted with the trick to open it."

"Show me how it is done," said Rawlins imperatively.

The jeweller slipped the circle over the clergyman's wrist and closing it with a snap the words "For ever" worked in brilliants were revealed. For some minutes Rawlins strove to discover the secret of the spring but in vain. "Take it off," he said at last. "The thing will suit me perfectly. I will take both the trinkets with me and if you will give me a pen and ink I will write you a cheque now."

He was in high spirits as he drove home, astounding the groom by his attempts to sing a ballad he remembered to have heard on Dalton's lips.

When they had reached the rectory the groom confided to the housekeeper his firm belief that it would not be long before the master was married. He had waited for a long while outside a jeweller's shop and on the way back his master had been singing something about going over the downs and winning a blooming bride. "I didn't think ee 'ad it in 'im, mum," said the fellow. "And 'is voice was that squealy that I should ha' bust if so be as an old 'ooman as were just in front slipped down in a puddle at the time an' gave me an hexcuse for laughin'. An' ee guv 'er half a crown which is near as amazin'."

The housekeeper promptly snubbed the man and sent him about his business, but before the morning the story was known throughout the village. In fact, there was only one person in Graysbourne who did not know of it and that was the person most concerned,

CHAPTER XXII

RUTH slept soundly the night after the receipt of the note and awoke refreshed. She rose early and went out into the crisp October morning. The grass was frost-spangled and the air mist-laden with the foretaste of winter. Soon the breeze cleared the air of mist and under the sunrays the frost crystals melted into shimmering drops of dew. She found her way to the woods, despite the wet, and gazed with renewed delight into the maze of gold and ruddy lights, for the trees were swathed in the radiance of autumn. The buoyant air brought colour to her cheeks and the charm of the woodlands swept over her to envelopment. Her mind felt at rest.

She brought back a healthy appetite to the breakfast table and her parents remarked upon it with pleasure.

"Where away, Ruth?" asked Mrs. Ryeland when the meal was over.

Ruth said she was going for another walk as the day was so fine, and slipped away without further questioning. Once again she sought the woods there to meditate upon the combat before her. She had no fear of the result. She felt quite sure of herself and quite convinced that no argument the rector could adduce would turn her from her decision, nevertheless in the hour or so at her disposal she thought she would be able to marshal her objections to the arguments she expected. But in the joyousness of the anticipation that she would soon be free, she found herself dismissing all thought of the matter from her mind. Instead of imagining the points he would be likely to urge, she found her attention wandering to a squirrel storing beechnuts in the hollow of a tree. Instead of formulating replies to possible pleadings, she found her attention distracted by the gambols of a rabbit.

"Play on," she called to the rabbit, thereby scaring him to earth; "in another hour I shall be as free as you."

She loitered for more than the hour she had intended before she made her way to the rectory, but it was not because she dreaded the interview. Not until she had rung the bell did she feel a qualm. Then for a moment she thought of running away. She had not quite recovered from the nervous impression when the door was opened and the feeling begot a hesitancy in her speech as she asked for the rector.

"The rector is expecting you, miss," replied the man as he ushered her into the library. "He will be with you directly."

Ruth's face burned suddenly. So Mr. Rawlins had ventured to tell his servants that he was expecting her to call. They could put only one construction on her visit. The censorship of the gossips would find justification for such an action only in the closest relationship. Was he striving to place her in a false position? She began to feel uneasy. At this moment Rawlins entered the room. There was nothing of the expectant lover about his demeanour. His mien was deliberation solidified, and not until he had carefully closed the door did he say a word.

"My dear Ruth," he said with a smirk, "I cannot express my delight at welcoming you to the house over which I trust you will shortly reign as my wife."

"I'm afraid," she answered, "your hopes rest upon a very unsubstantial foundation."

He lifted his hands deprecatingly before handing her to a chair, and seating himself opposite. "Is not that the very question you are going to discuss with me? I do not want you to have any preconceived opinions on the subject. All I ask is that you will listen to my arguments and I am convinced that you will appreciate their strength."

His tone was so quiet that Ruth recovered from the fear which had at first assailed her. "I hope, too, that

the discussion will lead to some result, though not to the one you anticipate," she replied.

"I am sorry for that," he answered. "I do not know why you should look on with such scorn, Ruth."

"It is scarcely scorn, Mr. Rawlins. Persistence such as yours compels admiration or—loathing."

"That is hardly kind of you," he said quietly, though the pallor of his lips showed that he had been moved by the remark. "Meanwhile, may I ask whether you have carefully considered all that I can offer you, Ruth?"

So her conjecture was correct. He was going to bid for her. She replied sharply. "The matter has not occurred to me. There has always seemed an impossible factor in any combination of benefits it is in your power to bestow."

"I understand." He bowed his head. "Still at the risk of increasing your admiration or—loathing, I am going to ask you to seriously consider the advantages which would be yours as my wife."

"I think it is useless," she replied. "But——"

He interrupted her. "Do you not see here in this room something desirable. Here are my books. You need put no limit on your reading."

Ruth looked round with a half sigh. Rawlins had struck one responsive chord. She was always hungry for books, and so few came her way. This room was lined with books. She had already noted a certain quiet charm which the apartment itself possessed. It was a severely furnished room, as befitted a clergyman's library, but the oak panels and furniture and the quiet-toned colours of the rugs and curtains pleased her sense of the fitness of things. She had not credited him with so much taste.

"I not only offer you books, but as my wife the opportunity of reading them," he continued. "Instead of an endless routine of petty trivialities I offer you leisure and—this." He designated the well-lined shelves with a gesture.

A smile formed on the girl's lips. "At least, Mr. Rawlins, I live. A man is sometimes content to bury himself in a library, but a woman prefers to turn over a page of life every day, even if it be well thumbed and dog-eared even."

He ignored her speech and, rising, asked her to follow him as he passed across the room and opened a door leading into another room beyond. "This," he said, "I have had decorated for my wife's own use. You may call it or make of it boudoir or study as you will. You see the shelves are empty. My wife will fill them with her own favourite volumes bound to her own choice. I have merely chosen half a dozen examples of the daintiest modern bindings for you to make a selection from if——" He picked up a pile of books which lay on one of the shelves and brought them to a table.

Ruth, swift at imagery, pictured the room as her own and could not help giving utterance to an exclamation of admiration. She had on one or two occasions been in the room, when it had been the morning-room in Mrs. Bygrave's time, and had admired it then, though the walls had been covered with a staring paper with impossible blue and gold flowers forming the basis of the design. The new rector had made a marvellous transformation. The walls had been panelled, and into four, panels had been hung old tapestries. The wood work was painted a deep ivory tone, and it might have acquired the tint with age, so perfectly did it serve as a background to the faded silks of the tapestries. There were three windows, two facing the south and opening on to the terrace with the garden beyond, the other, a deep bow, looking westward up the valley. Ruth thought how pleasant a place that window would be when the setting sun was broken up by the tiny latticed panes. The room would be equally comfortable on winter nights when the rose silk curtains were drawn and the flickering candle-light gave life to the figures

in the tapestries, and the firelight an added warmth to the thick rugs which lay upon the felted floor. The furniture was stiffly arranged, but Ruth felt that in half an hour she could transform the room into a dwelling place where it would be a delight to rest and to dream. She took no notice of the books to which her host had directed her attention.

"Did you design this room yourself, Mr. Rawlins?" she asked, and there was a note of respect in her voice which it had hitherto lacked when she addressed him.

"The idea was mine," he replied, "though I must admit I was fortunate in finding a firm who managed to carry out my scheme so admirably. I am glad it finds favour with you. If the pictures do not please you it will be easy to replace them."

She glanced at the subjects of the sketches. There were half a dozen water-colours, soft seascapes in blues and greys between the tapestries, and over the mantel a Burne-Jones maiden, draped in blue, gazed wistfully into a horizonless distance. She made no reply, but gave her attention to the books he had handed to her. She turned them over, and laying them down again walked back into the other room. Rawlins followed her, and there was a smile on his face.

"Before we finish our discussion I should wish to show you the remainder of the rectory," he said.

Ruth followed him, chafing at the fact that such trivialities as furniture should have affected her even temporarily. But as they passed from chamber to chamber she could not help seeing that as the rector's wife she would enjoy a number of luxuries which made a particular appeal to her senses. Indeed the house was a model of clerical æstheticism, only broadening into something of unclerical brightness in the apartments which had been especially fitted for the occupation of the future mistress of the household.

As Rawlins noted the effect produced upon his visitor he grew exultant, and he was more alert in his manner

than Ruth had ever seen him when they finished the survey at the point at which they had commenced and once more entered the library. The girl dropped wearily into a chair, but the man remained standing.

"I have now shown you what your home would be like," he remarked, "let me give you some idea of the position I offer you."

"There is no need," she answered quietly.

"Pardon me," he continued. "I have made inquiries and the squire has assured me that he will secure your reception in the best society the county affords——"

Ruth interrupted him hotly. "You have dared speak of the matter to him?" she asked.

"I have ventured to clear your path of any obstacles which you might consider to stand in the way of your perfect comfort," he replied with something of a sneer. "He thoroughly approved my choice, and indeed informed me that had he been younger he would have entered the lists as my rival, though to speak quite frankly, I doubt whether he would have offered you marriage."

Ruth made no reply and he continued, "Let me picture to you what your life would be as wife to one of the country bumpkins of the neighbourhood. "What! There is no need?" he said, as she made a gesture of dissent. "Perhaps not. I can realise that the dull company of any one of the youthful farmers you know would be little to your taste. Are you, then, going to remain at home for ever? Have you considered what that will be like when you make it known to them that you have refused my offer?"

He paused, watching the changing expression on the girl's face, but as she still was silent he went on: "Be my wife, Ruth. I can give you more than I have shown you, much more. I am wealthier than even village gossip credits me with being. My duties here can be delegated for long periods to a curate, and together we can visit any part of the world you may

desire. Paris, Italy, the Rhine, Switzerland or further afield—India and Japan if you will. I can show you all the beauties of other lands, and we may taste of the pleasures of each in turn.”

His love had lifted him out of his former self, his views had extended, his education progressed immensely under the influence of his passion. But nothing could destroy the staccato vulgarity of his speech or redeem the acrid oiliness of his appearance as he offered himself and his possessions to the object of his desire. Even the half-formed wish to enjoy the goods of this world faded from Ruth's mind as her eyes dwelt on the figure of the man who offered them to her. She answered him at last with a text, softly :—

“ And then Satan took him up into a high mountain and showed unto him all the kingdoms of the world, and said unto him : ‘ All these will I give thee ——.’ ” There she stopped.

The Reverend Robert Rawlins had his answer and he knew it. The pink on his brow swelled to purple and his lips paled with fury. “ I have one more argument,” he said hoarsely. He went to his desk and, from a locked drawer, took the letter Ruth had written to him on the previous day. He took at the same time a couple of morocco leather cases from the same receptacle. Though his fingers still trembled, yet when he faced Ruth once more he spoke calmly.

“ I had bought these trinkets for you, Miss Ryeland, in the hope that you would wear them as a pledge of our engagement. Will you so far gratify a rejected suitor as to allow him to see them worn for once ? ”

“ Keep them for one more worthy,” she replied.

But, as he insisted, she held out her hand and he clasped the bracelet upon her wrist and slipped the ring on her finger. The girl's lip curled as she noted the design of each.

“ Was this diamond heart with its drops of blood supposed to represent mine or yours ? ” she asked.

"That you will better be able to judge of when you have heard my final argument," he replied.

She looked up at the menace in his tone and made a gesture to remove the ring. He stopped her.

"Take heed, if that ring does not remain on your finger the result to you will be shame."

The girl flushed with anger and rose from her chair. "I think it will be best for us to part before you are tempted to say something you may regret."

He walked to the door and turned the key. "When you have heard me out you shall be at liberty to depart if you please." He paused for a moment to gather breath, and Ruth looked round for the means of escape. She wondered whether he had lost his senses and for an instant thought of alarming the house with her screams. But she was reassured by the tone of his voice when he next spoke.

"You wrote me a letter yesterday," he said.

"I did," she made answer, "and if you had been wise you would have accepted it as final."

He smiled grimly. "In that letter," he continued, "I find this passage." He unfolded the letter and read aloud, "I tell you what I have never yet breathed to a living soul, namely, that long ago I gave myself entirely to another——"

"Well?" said Ruth haughtily though her face paled.

"If you persist in your refusal," said Rawlins deliberately, "I shall go straight to your father and, on the evidence of this letter, tell him that I can no longer contemplate marrying his daughter because she has confessed to me that she has given her honour into the keeping of another man."

Ruth lay back in her chair, her eyes dilated with horror. The magnitude of the infamy shown by the bringing of such a charge took from her the power of speech.

"Let me see—let me see," she asked.

He held the letter before her eyes.

"I—I didn't mean—you interpret it wrongly," she muttered, half distracted.

He only smiled sardonically at her. "Your confession is only open to one construction," he replied.

Ruth made no answer. The blow had overwhelmed her. She did not know what to do. Would her father believe her? What would her mother think? She could not tell.

Her persecutor continued: "I shall tell him that you further confessed to me that a certain pupil of Mr. Bygrave's—Dalton, Frank Dalton"—he repeated the name with malicious pleasure—"took advantage of your youth and—and—that in view of your confession I can no longer contemplate making you my wife." A watery smile played round his lips. "A clergyman's wife should be like Cæsar's, above suspicion." He went again to the door and deliberately unlocked it. "Now you may go if you desire to do so."

But Ruth never stirred. Her brain reeled as she strove to think out the position, but instead of formulating any reply she could merely watch her fingers clasp and unclasp as she knotted them before her and wonder why they would not be still. Faintly there throbbed up in her throat the cry, "Mercy! Oh, mercy!" Her eyes sought his in appeal. But the light she saw there was the same she had recognised and had fled from once before when she had met him in the fields alone.

"Are you going?" he whispered.

"I—I cannot." The words dropped apparently without her will from her lips. In a moment he was at her side and bending towards her. She barely distinguished the words "Mine, mine," and then as his lips met hers she fainted.

He had not expected this of his victim, and for a while he was alarmed. His first impulse was to summon assistance. But he did not obey the impulse immediately. With trembling fingers he unloosed the collar at her neck and disarranged her clothing. Fate was fighting for him and placing the girl in his power. She had been alone with him a long while and the ser-

vants would be certain to gossip. A faint smile was on his lips as he rang the bell and bade the footman who answered send the housekeeper to him at once.

As Ruth returned to consciousness she became first aware of a clerical voice. "I must take you into my—into our—confidence, Mrs. Sefton. Miss Ryeland had just promised to be my wife when——"

A shudder shook the girl's frame.

"She is coming round, sir," said the housekeeper.

Rawlins took her hand and bent assiduously over her. "Ruth, dear," he murmured, "you are among friends." Then speaking again to the housekeeper he said, "You will please not mention to the servants that I attempted to revive Miss Ryeland myself before calling for assistance. I naturally wished to spare her feelings."

With an effort Ruth sat upright and becoming conscious of her disarray her fingers clutched feebly at her bodice. "You—might—have—spared—me—this," she said feebly and a sob swelled in her bosom and broke in her throat.

"There, there, my dear," said the housekeeper comfortingly, "you'll soon be all right. A faint is nothing at all. You must just come upstairs and after you have had a mouthful of brandy lie down for a little while."

"Please remain with Miss Ryeland, Mrs. Sefton," said Rawlins. "I think, my dear," he added, turning to Ruth, "I shall keep you to lunch. I will send a note to your mother saying where you are, so that she will suffer no anxiety."

He waved away her weak protests and supported her across the room and up the stairs until he consigned her at the door of his own chamber to Mrs. Sefton's care. Not for a moment was she left alone. She lay down at the housekeeper's bidding conscious of only one thing, that it was necessary to hold herself steadily and well lest the servants should notice something in her demeanour which should bear witness to frailty. Too late she realised the error she had made in placing herself

in her reverend suitor's power. Now it seemed to her that she was conquered and nothing was left to her but submission. So she remained to luncheon and made no objection to Rawlins accompanying her back to the farm. She bore herself proudly through the homely badinage with which the news of the engagement was greeted by the farmer and submitted to the awkward caresses of her future husband with the resignation of a newly purchased slave for the harem.

Not until welcome night came and she was at last alone in her room with the key turned in the lock did she give way to her despair. The morning had been so bright and joyous. She had been a girl then, she felt an old woman now. She wondered whether the sky had become overcast. She threw open the casement. No, the stars shone out brightly as ever, the air was fresh with a breath of frost moving upon it. The change was in herself. She tore the ring from her finger. She understood the symbolism of the design now. How she hated her conqueror. She could feel his kisses still burning her skin and moved to the mirror to see if the marks were visible. Until this moment she had forgotten the fetter upon her arm, for it had slipped under her sleeve. But the glitter of the brilliants reminded her again of her bondage, and she strove to get rid of the bauble. But the jeweller had not lied when he praised the ingenuity of the spring lock. Try as she would to unclasp it the fetter remained fast. Ruth bruised her arm and her fingers in a vain endeavour to force it open. She beat it against the wall, it still held her tightly in its bond. She ceased striving at last and, throwing herself on her bed, quenched the candle whose rays seemed to seek out the diamonds. In the darkness she still fancied she could see them gleaming. Sleep did come to her eventually, but even then through a night of immeasurable woe she still dreamed of the words "For ever".

CHAPTER XXIII

DURING the month which passed while Rawlins was wooing Ruth Ryeland life was running very smoothly with Lossie Grove at Peter's Wharf. The days were full of little surprises and unforeseen joys. Her outlook, too, was coloured vividly with the love which surged warmly in her veins. Nicholas Ryeland was away making holiday, and his absence gave her a sense of freedom from restraint and enabled her to spend more time with Dalton. During this time Lossie became used to her new clothes, learned to coil her hair neatly and even invested a spare sixpence in a cream which a chemist assured her would subdue the redness of her hands. This redness was one of her minor troubles. Somehow the red rough hands which had never seemed out of place in the faded sleeves of her old frock became terribly prominent when thrust through the cuffs of the white silk blouse which Pollie had procured for her and which she wore when she went with Dalton for a day on the river.

She enjoyed two of these outings in the course of the month, and on each occasion it seemed to the girl as if she had stepped into a higher world. Hitherto she had only looked on at the world taking its pleasure. Now she was one of the pleasure seekers. This thought was an untranslatable delight for a week at least. One result was that she carried herself more erectly. She felt that she was something more than the mere labourer's daughter. But on the second occasion her simple conceit received a blow. Dalton had forgotten until too late to provide a luncheon basket, so

instead of picnicking in the boat as they had done on the first occasion they were compelled to go for their mid-day meal to one of the riverside hotels. It was the girl's first experience of a properly furnished table and she did not understand the use of half of the articles laid for her use. With the salmon mayonnaise at the beginning she blundered hopelessly in the use of the knife. Dalton fancied he saw a smile on the waiter's face and strove to set her right as to the use of the cutlery. His interference made matters worse. Lossie became self-conscious at once through her awkward attempts to follow her companion's directions. Towards the end of their meal he heard a remark from the occupants of a near table about the sort of person who took the housemaid out for the day followed by a laugh and, muttering a curse, he hastily settled the bill and bade Lossie quite roughly "to make haste and come out of the beastly place".

Lossie obeyed him meekly enough, and he hardly glanced at her until they were once more afloat. Then he was surprised to see that she was on the very verge of tears. He demanded the reason though he guessed what the answer would be.

"I think I should like to go home," she said.

"Why?" he asked. "Are you feeling tired or unwell?"

"It's not that," she answered. "Only I can see you are ashamed of me. I—I am not the same as the ladies. You feel out of place in my company and I—I don't know what to do."

He thrust the sculls doggedly into the water and muttered a shame-faced denial.

But Lossie continued, "No, it's no use your denying it. I could see what you were thinking of just as well as I could see the difference between myself and the other girls. They knew how to behave and I didn't. Their hands were soft and white and mine are red and rough. It is no use your trying to dress me up as

a lady. I'm only a village girl and every one can see it."

He knew not how to answer her, for her words had once more brought him face to face with the problem as to where this friendship was to end.

He sculled in silence for a minute and then he ceased his labour and said, "I'm a beast, Lossie, and I beg your pardon. You are quite right but—this is a big but—it will be very easy for you to learn to 'behave' as you call it. But we will not discuss that now. Let us enjoy ourselves to-day and I will talk to you about these things to-morrow."

Lossie soon recovered her spirits. She could not be unhappy for long together while in Dalton's company, but he was rather quiet for the remainder of the day, and when he was alone in his chambers that night he faced the problem seriously.

What part was he to play in Lossie's life? She was beautiful undoubtedly, but beauty was not the only thing he asked of a wife. Yet was beauty her only endowment? He put the case fairly to himself. She was beautiful, and, so far as he could judge, pure in word, thought and deed and yet—— Well, he could hardly fancy himself introducing her to any of his social equals as his wife. He could fancy the sneers on the lips when some chance solecism betrayed her origin. Still she was young and could learn. Her mind was vigorous, hungry for new impressions. Herein seemed to him to be the key to the problem. He would mould her mind and mend her manners. When he had reached this decision he fell asleep and dreamed of Ruth.

The next day he met Lossie and told her of his thoughts. He said nothing of his dreams. He finished by asking her to promise to marry him. She listened with flushed cheeks and brightening eyes and answered "no".

When he pressed her to tell him why, she said she was not worthy.

He told her he would ask her again when he had helped her to pass the only barrier which parted them, and was at so great pains to impress upon her the necessity that she should do her best to get rid of the little solecisms which worried him, that her brow became shadowed and the light passed out of her eyes. This was not the speech of a lover. As she became cold he grew more ardent. He told her that she was the most beautiful girl in the world, told her, too, that he would rather spend a minute in her company than an hour with any one else he had ever seen, declared that it was only for her sake he was anxious to teach her anything, since for his own he would prefer to keep her as she was. Then the light came back to her eyes and she listened. But she held him to his promise that he would teach her the things of which she was ignorant and, when she was perfect and would not disgrace him, he should ask her again if he wished.

A fortnight swept by and every morning Lossie stole into the dull chambers in Barnard's Inn to be coached in the ways of civilised men and women. Frank treated her as an elder brother would his sister, so that she felt free as air in his company and her education proceeded apace. But this period of happiness came to an end in September with the return of Nicholas Ryeland to his seat in the office, and the occasional occupancy of his rooms at the wharf.

Lossie had forgotten her half-formed fears of her employer, and for awhile nothing occurred to awaken them again. Ryeland spoke to her familiarly when she waited upon him, but his manner was in no way offensive. He asked her how things had gone in his absence, if she had any complaints to make, if any of the people had treated her freely. He talked too of her old home which he had visited, and amongst other items of news informed her of his sister's engagement to the Reverend Robert Rawlins. Lossie was glad to hear the news

though she wondered at it. To her it was incomprehensible that any girl could think of the curate when she had once known Frank Dalton. She pitied Ruth Ryeland in that she had forgotten Dalton, but at the same time she could not but exult in the fact that she was a gainer thereby and could not but exult, too, in the beauty which had won Dalton to her side and enchained him there. It was only when she saw the effect that her good looks produced upon her employer that she felt inclined to wish she was as plain as the majority of girls. Before long he began to bring her little presents of sweetmeats and flowers. She did not know how to refuse them for he would simply tell her that he had left the gift for her in his room and would be gone before she could reply. Then he began to demand a kiss from her as payment, and again she knew not how to refuse. She always sought flight but usually he caught her, and after kissing her would tell her she was a little fool and set her free.

She could not bring herself to speak of the matter to Frank. She was beginning to be afraid that he might not be able to understand the position she was in, and think that she had encouraged the advances she detested so heartily, but at length when Nicholas never came to the house without crumpling her up in his arms and tasting the sweetness of her lips and even seemed to demand her attendance for the express purpose, she determined to appeal to her father for protection.

She was unfortunate in the selection of the time for doing so. Philip had just returned from the Friar's Head where he had been lounging for the greater part of the morning and he was dull and heavy with beer. Lossie was busy laying a cloth for dinner and her father inquired crossly why the meal was not ready.

His complaint gave Lossie an opportunity. "It was Mr. Nicholas kept me, father. He's always about the place hindering me, and I—I'm afraid he doesn't mean no good."

"Why, what nonsense be gettin' in thee yud now?" demanded Grove.

"Well," said the girl blushing, "he's always trying to kiss me and—and I wish you would speak to him, father."

"Ee 'ooldn't come if ee didn't encourage un," replied Philip.

Lossie would not be put off so. "You shouldn't say that," she replied. "You know I would rather have his room than his company any day."

"I've zeen ee vulin' about wi' un," said Grove, "an' it zeemed to me as 'ow youm liked it."

The girl drew herself up indignantly. "It seems to me, father, that you don't care what happens to me."

"Thur, now, if ever I did zee the like o' gels," replied Philip. "I ooldn't zee ee come to no 'arm. I wur only jokin' zame's Measter Nicholas. Ee be a good un, ee be, an' means no 'arm. Kissin' ain't nuthin'. I reckon as thee do-unt make no fuss when Measter Dalton do kiss ee."

Lossie was silent. She could not entrust the secret of her love to her father. It was too pure, too beautiful, too sacred a thing for even the knowledge to be shared with anybody.

Philip continued. "I do reckon as Measter Nicholas do mean better'n t'other chap."

"But Mr. Nicholas is married," broke involuntarily from Lossie's lips.

"An' zo ee be thinkin' o' zettin thee cap at Measter Dalton, be ee?" replied Grove with scorn. "Zhure, ee be bigger vule than I ever reckoned daughter o' mine ud be if ee thinks un 'ull marry ee. If thee wants a baby under thee belt wi'out thee lines I'd go to the measter vor un. He ud be zafe vor vive bob a week anyways."

Lossie's face burned and she fled from the room without another word. She saw that she would have to fight her battle alone, and the reception of her request

by her father was another loosening of the bonds which held them together. They were to be further loosened that same night.

Up to this time Dalton had seldom called at the wharf in the evening, for Lossie had preferred to remain at home and give her father the whole of her time lest he should fall into his old habits, but on the night in question Dalton, thinking that Philip could manage to spare Lossie for one evening at least, reversed his custom.

Grove answered his ring at the bell and Dalton at once asked his permission to take Lossie to the theatre. "I should be glad if you would come too, Grove," he added with some hesitation.

He was greatly relieved, however, when declining on his own behalf, Philip expressed himself as pleased if Lossie could be persuaded to go out. Lossie allowed herself to be persuaded to accompany him. They left Grove standing at the door in the gateway watching them. "I 'ull be gone to bed avore ee be whoam," he said. "Zo it ud be best if ee took th' key with ee an' be zhure to lock up all right when ee comes in, little-un."

The girl felt dull and anxious as to her father, and told her fears to Frank as they walked along Fleet Street to the Strand. But he laughed them away. He thought Lossie's alarm at her father's weakness unnecessarily great, for never by a single word had she hinted at her one terrible experience of it. But she was not of the temperament which broods over troubles. The light and movement in the Strand soon drove away her dull thoughts, and by the time they had reached the door of the Adelphi Theatre all thought of her cares had disappeared.

Dalton had selected the Adelphi for Lossie's introduction to the theatrical world, because he judged that its broad melodrama would be certain to interest her. And indeed the play intoxicated her. To Dalton the melo-

dramatic *melange* seemed too absurd even to deride, and he was glad to find amusement in watching the play of emotion in his companion's face. She forgot even his presence for a time in the perils of the heroine and the misfortunes of the hero.

At the end of the second act he could not help laughing at the excitement she displayed. "It isn't real, you know, Lossie," he said in mild deprecation of her interest in the plot and the characters.

"I know it isn't," she answered. "But it's very beautiful. Do they always do it like this?"

"They've been doing it like this," he said, glancing at the programme, "for just one hundred and thirty-nine nights."

Lossie did not grasp the irony of the remark, and sinking back in her seat with a sigh, hoped that everything would end happily.

"You needn't be afraid, Lossie," he told her. "Plays always end happily. That's where they differ from life. But men make plays, you see, not in accordance with life as it is, but as their audiences would like to see it."

"And do audiences always like things to end happily?" she asked.

"They have a sort of sentimental feeling that virtue should always be rewarded and vice punished. People won't go to see plays that tell the truth about life any more than they will read books that tell the unadulterated truth about themselves," he said. "I suppose it is because they want to get away from the realities of existence that they prefer stodgy, sentimental romance. Why, if the penny public had the slightest taste of any sort I really don't know what I should do for a living. I'm certain no one would read the rubbish I write."

The remark reminded Lossie of a promise that had been made to her. "You have never given me one of your stories to read, Frank," she said. "You always give me other people's."

"I have been giving you books which tell you of how people live. My stories are like this play."

"Still, I should like to read one." She nestled close to him, evoking a broad smile from a woman of redundant form seated behind them. "Bring me one tomorrow, will you, Frank?"

"I believe you are a witch," he answered, "and have divined that I have copies of three of them in my pocket now."

She gave a little cry of delight. "You brought them for me?"

He drew the pink-covered novelettes from his pocket and handed them to her. "One of them," he said, "I founded upon your adventures, and the money I got for it paid for your frock."

She looked up into his eyes with so winning a smile that he felt inclined to kiss her there in the midst of the chattering crowd.

"See, I even ventured to use your name as a title, it is so pretty, you know."

"Oh! Frank, how could you?" A rosy delight shone out in her cheeks. To see her name printed out in heavy characters on the cover took away her breath for a moment.

"And does the story end happily?" she asked a moment later.

"Of course. There's the usual wedding and you are happy ever after. I shouldn't have been able to sell it if it hadn't ended so."

"Tell me, Frank——" she began, but a warning "Sh-sh-sh" came from a dozen pairs of lips about them. The lights went down and the curtain rose and Lossie looked once more at the stage but not until she had secured the precious novelettes. It would have been desecration to place them in her pocket. In the semi-darkness she unbuttoned her blouse and slipped them inside her corsage so that they might lie next her heart. Then she felt free to enjoy the drama to the end.

Dalton wished her to return with him to his chambers for supper, but remembering her fears about her father she insisted upon returning to the wharf.

"You can be very obstinate when you like, Lossie," he remarked when he found his arguments useless.

She laughed. "I wonder whether you have made me obstinate in this story about me."

"I'm afraid I have not done justice to the real owner of the title," he replied. He felt very tenderly towards her, for he recognised that her life was much harder than he had previously conceived since she had told him of her father's failing. All the way back to Peter's Wharf he talked to her of the home he hoped she would soon agree to share with him.

He left her at the gate seeing that it was carefully shut after him. Lossie would not allow him to enter, for she dreaded lest he should see her father in a state of intoxication. She had not told Dalton the full extent of her trouble, and she dreaded his knowing lest it should raise a barrier between them.

She was very thankful that she had dismissed him when on mounting the stairs she found her father lying full length on the floor in a drunken stupor. She was a brave little woman. She unlaced Philip's boots, got off his coat and loosed his collar and with some difficulty roused him sufficiently to persuade him to stumble to his room and lie down on the bed. There, after throwing a blanket over him, she left him.

The contrast between the enjoyment of the evening and the misery that awaited her upon her return seemed to give point to Frank's remarks that it was only in Adelphi plays and penny novelettes that things ended happily. In a minute the romance had faded out of her life forthwith to be replaced by a sordid reality. She lit a lantern and started on the round of the offices to see that everything was all right. It was dreary work. The long silent rooms stored with chests and barrels seemed to harbour strange forms in the shadows.

She could not resist looking over her shoulder at every corner fancying following footsteps. But there was no cause for alarm and she could laugh at her fears when once more she was safe in her own bedroom.

It was a long time before she could sleep however. Inclination and what she conceived to be her duty were at handgrips. On one side was her love and Frank, on the other side was her father sinking, every hour deeper in the mire. Only she might save him. She looked longingly at the novelettes but instead of reading them she resolutely put out the light and fought the fight with her conscience in the dark.

The next morning when Philip came in to his breakfast she told him that she would not leave him alone again until he had given up his drinking habits. Grove was querulously argumentative on the subject. It was only once in a way, he declared, and no man was the worse for a drop now and then. Lossie reminded him of what had happened during their canal life. Philip turned on her.

“Dang ee, wo-unt ee let I vorget it. Thee bist allus a-throwin’ it up in my veace even now I ha’ gotten a whoam vor ee as even a vine lady ain’t no call to be ashamed on. I do-unt mind when ee goes a pleazurin’ an’ why zhould ee grudge I a drop o’ comvort. Tisn’t much I gets, anyway.”

“But if Mr. Nicholas were to find it out he would soon send us off,” she said.

Philip thought for a moment and then an unpleasant grin came into his face. “It do zeem to I whether we-uns stays on here or turns out to vind another job depends more on you than I anyways.”

Lossie could scarcely mistake his meaning and she made no reply though even this did not salve her conscience as to the duty which she considered bound her to her father. Supposing she were to leave him? She did not know what would become of him.

CHAPTER XXIV

NICHOLAS RYELAND had never regarded his marriage in the light of a love match nor had he ever hesitated to be unfaithful to his marriage vows when opportunity offered and desire prompted him. None of his infidelities had, however, been inspired by any powerful passion. A fleeting fancy for a pretty face behind a bar, a passing attraction towards a well-formed figure in the chorus of one of the variety theatres, had supplied him with the little affairs which enabled him to hold his own with the young men of his own standing in the city without being dubbed puritan or reproached with being an habitue of Exeter Hall. He had found no difficulties in the way of his amours hitherto, and when first he remarked Lossie's budding beauty he had not imagined that he ever would find any difficulty in moulding her to his will. He was so certain of the girl that he intentionally dallied in his pursuit of her. Her resistance to his advances amused him. He did not think that they could be seriously meant, for though hitherto he had thought it folly for a man to be guilty of an intrigue with a servant of his own household or a female employee at his place of business, he could not imagine that the servant honoured with such attentions could be aught but delighted. But there came a time when he really was compelled to see that Lossie did not look upon him with favour.

One afternoon very shortly after Lossie's visit to the theatre, Nicholas had seen Grove pass the office window on the way to the street and it occurred to him that as he had no pressing business matters to engage his

attention that the opportunity to come to an understanding with his pretty handmaiden was too good to be missed. He went to his room in the house, and when Lossie answered the summons of his bell he bade her bring a couple of glasses and he brought out from a locked cupboard a bottle of champagne. When Lossie returned with the glasses expecting to find some one of her employer's friends with him she was amazed at being invited to remain as the guest. She excused herself as well as she knew how, but when Ryeland insisted, she slipped out of the room and remained deaf to his summons to return. Thereupon he went in search of her and found her in the room above his own. He had stolen up the stairs very softly fearing that the girl might lock the door against him so that before she was aware of his approach, Lossie found his arm round her waist and her arms held in a grip from which, struggle as she might, she could not escape.

"Why are you so foolish?" he asked. "There is no need for you to run away from me. I wouldn't think of hurting you, Lossie."

"Let me be. Oh! please, Mr. Nicholas, let me be," she pleaded in reply.

"Don't be a fool," he answered roughly as he drew her towards him until he held her so closely that he could feel her heart beating. "Don't be a fool," he repeated, "you have nothing to be afraid of. A pretty girl like you must have a lover sooner or later, and——"

"Let me go——" cried Lossie, her voice rising to the verge of a scream.

"There, then," said Ryeland, as he let go his hold. "Have your own way, but I want you to listen a moment to what I wish to say to you." His passion had only been inflamed by the girl's resistance, but he was cool enough to reflect that if she were to make a great outcry her screams might reach the ears of some

of the employees about the place and bring them on the scene.

Lossie stood facing him, her face white and her breast heaving.

"You can have your own way," he said, "but I advise you to count the cost. Remember that I am master here, and it rests with me whether you stay or go. You must have seen how fond I am getting of you, and if you are the sensible girl I take you for you will see which way your bread is buttered. I can do a lot for you, you know, Lossie. In fact, I have been thinking for some time past that you are a cut above this sort of business. Those pretty little hands ought not to be soiled with rough work, and if you are a little kind to me there is no need for you to do another day's work."

He waited for the girl to reply, but she said never a word.

"Tell me, Lossie, wouldn't you like a cottage in the country where you could be my little housekeeper and I could come and see you two or three nights a week? It would be much pleasanter than living in this barn of a place. Nobody would know we were not married, for we would go to some place where we were not known."

She still kept silence.

"I'm not such a monster, am I? You might go farther and fare worse, you know, Lossie. Perhaps you think that some day you will be married, but I can tell you that you will be a lot better off if you fall in with my suggestion. You are a bit too good to be thrown away on a labouring man who would get drunk and knock you about and turn you into an old woman in a couple of years. Better take me on, Lossie."

"I—I would rather die," said the girl, finding speech at last.

Ryeland laughed unpleasantly. "So you are that sort of fool, are you?" He turned on his heel to leave.

"Think it over, Lossie. I can wait for your decision, but, meanwhile, if you say a word to anyone on the matter, you can take it from me that out of Peter's Wharf you go neck and crop."

The sound of a heavy footstep on the stairs gave the signal for him to leave, and he returned to his own room, passing Grove on the way. Something in the man's appearance and gait attracted his attention. He turned and glanced after him, and a gleam of satisfaction came into his eyes. "By heaven! The man's drunk," he said. "I think, Miss Lossie, it will not be very long before you will be glad to accept me and my offer."

Lossie said nothing of her experience to her father. She had repulsed Ryeland, and from what he had said she guessed that she would have a temporary respite. But she felt that she must tell Frank. He was the only person in the wide world to whom she could look for protection. He was her friend, more, her lover. The rosy light came into her cheeks again at the thought. He would protect her. She regained her cheerfulness when she came to this decision.

She was very silent while she prepared and poured out her father's tea, and as soon as the meal was over she went on to the balcony out of his way. It was a Friday, and in all probability she would not see Nicholas Ryeland again until Monday. By that time she would have been able to take counsel with Frank as to what course to adopt. She felt she could dismiss his insults entirely from her mind. She had the means for so doing at her command in the novelette which had lain at her bosom ever since Dalton had given it to her. Now she curled herself up on the balcony to make the most of the fading light to read the story. The commencement was a highly coloured description of her early life in Graysbourne, and her eyes opened wonderingly as she strove to recognise herself in the picture of the heroine. She was almost

alarmed. "If he thinks I am like that how disappointed he will be when he discovers what I really am like," she commented. But she felt quite equal to making the melodramatic sacrifice of liberty which the villain demanded as the price of the hero's safety. She pictured Dalton as the hero, of course, and thought his love rhapsodies beautiful, only wondering with regret why he had not spoken to her so.

She followed the trials of the hero and heroine with breathless interest, and did not lay down the novelette until the marriage, and the death of the villain brought the story to an end. It was blind man's holiday by the time Lossie's tear-dimmed eyes had finished with the pages.

The stuff was the turgid romance demanded of the author, but to Lossie it seemed the perfection of story writing. To her, child of the wilderness, printed words had the authority of inspiration. To read the novelette was to listen to an inspired Frank whispering those long ardent speeches in her ear. It was inflammable material to pour into an ardent girl's mind. To Lossie the world was a freshly opened book, and on the title page was written the one word "Love". And the love she knew was the physical love which Ryeland sought from her, though she had some dim idea that it was more than that. The jingle of wedding bells at the end of the story did not awaken much of an echo in her heart. She could have dispensed with them, for her early life had not led her to attribute much importance to church ceremonies. She loved Frank and he loved her. She had opened the book of life and had grasped love and happiness. She could only wonder at her good fortune.

The last of the light had faded out of the western sky and she still remained on the balcony watching the long flickering reflections in the water. From the room within she could hear her father's dull snore half drowned by the lapping of the tide against the piers

of the wharf below. She dreamed on. Her heart was beating fast at the thoughts which came to her, and she pressed her hand against it to stop the throbbing. The attempt was vain, and she laughed aloud at her own foolishness, the full-throated music of a joyous heart.

It was desecration to pass out of the temple of the night into the dull room and take up the thread of her ordinary duties, but she must needs do so and she was rewarded in a way she did not expect. In the letter box she found a letter addressed to herself. She knew the handwriting and she pressed the missive a dozen times to her lips before she broke the seal. The contents renewed all the heart flutterings which had made her dreams earlier in the evening so delightful. It was her first real love-letter for previously Dalton had written formally if not coldly. But in this it seemed as if he must have been affected with the same wave of passion which had flowed with such vigour in the girl's veins.

"My little sweetheart," wrote Dalton, "I may call you so, may I not; since your eyes looked so kindly on me last night? Those dear eyes, liquid as the sea under a cloudless midnight sky. You don't know, Lossie, how often I have longed to tell you of the effect they produce on me, but I have not dared lest you should be led to doubt the depth of my love for you because of the extravagance into which I know I should be betrayed. Now if I tell you that one glance from your eyes is more happiness than I deserve you will not believe me——"

"No," said Lossie, as she kissed the paper.

"But it is true, for once, not so long ago, I strove to put you from my memory. I failed, dear, and now I know that it would be impossible to do so, for in truth I love you so dearly that I feel I cannot live without you. You will believe me, Lossie mine, will you not?"

"What a thing it is to be in love with a pair of blue eyes. I had just taken up my pen to write to ask you

if you will try to come with me for one more day on the river before the season ends, and you can see for yourself how it has run away with me. But you will come on Sunday, dear love, won't you? We shall probably not have another opportunity before the frost sends the leaves a fluttering to the ground and robs the woodlands of their glory. I want you to spend one autumn day with me under Clieveden woods now clad in the same golden brown which shines always in my sweetheart's tresses. I will call for you early—the days are so short now—and I want you to think over one thing so that you may be prepared to give me an answer. On Sunday I want you to decide upon the day which shall see us made one. My own little sweetheart, good-night. FRANK."

"My own little sweetheart!" She repeated the words softly. How sweetly they sounded. Again the melody of her happy heart awoke the echoes of the dull passages in the old house. There had been nothing so beautiful as this letter in the story. Swift as the thought was the consequent action. The printed love-tale was dethroned and the written message lodged triumphantly in her bosom. "The day upon which they were to be made one." She would leave that to him. But her father, what would he do? For her, happiness; for him, what? Perhaps misery. The laughter died in her throat and she went to him quietly.

Grove had awakened and was inclined to be communicative.

"What be g'wain' to do a Zunday, little-un?" he asked. "G'wain' out vor th' day, may-be?"

"Not if you are wanting me, father," she replied with a little catch in her voice. It would be hard to be robbed of the day's enjoyment.

"I won't be wantin' ee, vor I wor thinkin' o' g'wain' in to 'ave my vood along o' Ned Saunders, th' caretaker over th' road," explained Philip.

"I don't like that Saunders," said Lossie hesitating.

"Ee didn't ax I to bring ee along ov I," replied Philip with a grin.

"He drinks too much," continued the girl.

"I never did zee such a milk-sop as thee bist," replied her father. "A man dursn't touch a drop wi'out thy vindin' vault. Anyways I be g'wain'."

"Mr. Dalton has asked me to go out with him and I think I may as well go if you are out," she said.

"Zartain you may," he said. "It 'ull save thee cookin' an' all. I 'ull zlip down to th' Vriar's an' tell Ned as zoon az I've been round th' warehousen."

He departed and Lossie was alone again to read and re-read her precious letter until she knew every word by heart. But in spite of the beautiful prospect it opened to her she could not help dreading the effect upon her father. She knew that he could not accompany her when she left the wharf for Frank. He would not enter into that dream existence. Yet she knew that when Frank called her she must needs go—go to him and kneel at his feet even though her father's dying voice bade her stay. And he had called to her at last. So amid laughter and tears she kissed his letter while she murmured "my love, my love, my dear, dear love".

CHAPTER XXV

THE weather was fine when Dalton made his appearance in Thames Street on the Sunday morning though the wind blowing gustily from the south-west presaged rain. Lossie was awaiting him in the gate-way and he stooped to kiss her. She gave him her lips and, remembering the letter he had written, he felt half afraid of the warmth of the fire he had kindled. But he was inflammable too, and they kissed again in the shadow of the archway and lingered in the kissing.

A laugh echoed in the passage and Grove's voice made the beams reverberate. "Th' little-un do tell I as she do-unt like kissin', Measter Dalton."

The two moved apart guiltily, but Frank recovering, called out cheerily, "My little sweetheart has never told me so as yet, Grove".

"An' if so be she had I be zertain as 'ow you'd not believed her. Pleasant times to ee both."

"Thanks. Good-bye!" The door clanged behind them and they were alone.

Dalton felt a little awkward at having been caught kissing Lossie but he said nothing about it. They hurried to Blackfriars and took tickets on the underground to Praed Street. Lossie did not notice her companion's silence. She was quite content to be with him, to be able to steal quiet glances at his face, to her the handsomest in the whole world. She was still wondering at her good fortune. She knew it was real at last. His kiss had told her so. At Paddington they found a compartment to themselves and were disgusted when a belated passenger entered it at the last moment

and spoiled their *tête-a-tête*. However Dalton had recovered his self-possession and they chattered merrily all the way to Taplow.

When they embarked the weather was still fine though the sky had become overcast and they had been on the water for barely ten minutes when rain began to fall. Dalton laid the boat up under a tree for another ten minutes but the fall increased and gave every sign of persistence. He covered Lossie with a mackintosh and pulled back to their starting place in disgust. There they entered a hotel and waited for another half hour in the hopes of the sky clearing. There were a dozen other people in the coffee-room weather-bound like themselves. Dalton chafed at their presence, and seeing no prospect of the weather improving he suggested that they should return to town and picnic in his chambers. Lossie agreed, and they returned by the next train. They made the best of matters but neither of them felt particularly cheerful. They were both damp and shivered with the cold in spite of the fact that Dalton had prescribed hot brandy and water before they started and had insisted upon Lossie sharing the medicine.

It was between one and two when they arrived at Barnard's Inn. The rain had ceased for a time, but an early autumn fog had swept down on the city and made it dank and gloomy to the last degree.

"I thought the day was to be such a bright one," said the girl despondently as they groped their way up the dark stairs.

"Don't be down-hearted, sweetheart," he answered. "We'll soon see if we cannot succeed in making it bright. We will shut out the wet and the fog and have a cosy time all to ourselves."

Soon the fire was blazing and the lamp burning brightly under a rosy shade bade defiance to the gloom outside.

"Now let me see if you are wet, Lossie," he said when the fire drew well.

"I'm not in the least wet, you covered me up too carefully Frank—dear," she replied. The endearment was pronounced timidly and accompanied with a faint blush. Until the previous day she had always addressed him as Mr. Dalton.

He ran his hand lightly over her dress and he found no dampness but her shoes were soaked. He ensconced her in an arm-chair in front of the fire and unlaced them despite her protest.

"Now off with your stockings, little one while I find you some slippers or I shall have to take them off for you."

She gave him a glance under her lashes that was almost sufficient provocation to make him fulfil his threat, but he turned away and sought for the slippers in the adjoining room and when he returned with them he found she had obeyed his wish.

"Now rest and get warm while I change into some dry clothes," he said.

With a sigh of content she threw herself back amongst the cushions and held up her feet for the slippers. They were very pretty little feet.

"You witch," said Dalton.

"I'm not. Witches are old and ugly and horrid," she replied.

"The most dangerous sort of witches are young and beautiful and work their charms with rosy little feet," he said, as he held the slippers to the fire before drawing them on for her.

"These are miles too big," she said pouting.

"I didn't expect Cinderella or I would have provided for her," he retorted.

Then he disappeared into his bedroom and emerged a few minutes later clean, dry and smiling.

"Just one kiss, little woman, and then we will get lunch ready; you must be dying of hunger."

She jumped to her feet with alacrity. "I should just

think I am hungry. I shall eat you if you don't give me something else." Then as she looked round the room she said, "After all I'm not sorry the rain came. It is so nice to be alone here with you for a whole long afternoon."

He caught hold of her hands and said earnestly, "Aye, dear. I thought the old place looked very homelike with you curled up amongst the cushions before the fire. It is always to look homelike soon, is it not, sweetheart?"

She looked up into his face trustfully. "When you will, Frank, but——"

"But what, my darling?"

Her face had clouded. "But I don't know what is to become of my father."

"Your father?" he answered lightly. "He is old enough to take care of himself, isn't he?" Then as he noticed the tears start to her eyes, he continued, "I didn't mean to hurt you, dear, but seriously you must see that sooner or later you must part from him. Of course, if he wants help at any time I shall always be there and the two of us will be able to look after him far better than you would alone."

"Yes—yes," she answered, though the cloud on her brow had not lightened. "That is what I have told myself again and again. But his ways are not our ways. He will not see much of us. He is proud, you know, and independent, and will not be beholden to anyone. Oh! Frank, I am afraid, and though sometimes I think it will be a relief to leave him, yet something tells me it would be wrong for me to do so. He has no one but me, and——" She paused.

"He shall come and live with us," declared Dalton impetuously.

"No," replied Lossie decidedly, "that would not do. You do not know what father can be when the drink takes hold of him. I've only told you scraps, for he is

a good father when he is all right, but when he drinks I'm afraid of him. I've sometimes almost hated him then, and I would never let him bring trouble into your life."

"My poor little sweetheart," he interrupted.

"It was while we were on the canal that I first noticed how it had taken hold of him and I tried to break him of it, but—Frank, I've never said a word of this to anyone. I'm almost ashamed to speak of it to you—but it happened that one night when he was drunk he took me and beat me, beat me before some of his drunken companions, men and women."

"My God!" broke in Frank hotly, "and yet you still think he has any claims upon you."

"It wasn't father," she said. "It was just the drink. When I told him what he had done he couldn't forgive himself. He gave up drinking till—till the past few months, and now he has started again."

"Then surely you will not hesitate now. Come, Lossie, tell me you will marry me soon. Let us fix the day——"

She answered as if she were communing with herself. "If he were quiet and sober I would leave him gladly, but if I were to desert him now and he should drift and drift—it might rest like a curse on our happiness if I were to leave him and he were to go down to hell alone."

Frank replied gravely. "I do not believe in the doctrine of sacrifice to such an extent. Tell me truly, Lossie. Do you love me?"

Her eyes met his glance without flinching. "I love you, Frank, more than I can tell. If you tell me to come I shall leave father and home behind me to-morrow—I think I should hear your voice if I were in my grave and you were to call. I cannot tell what you are to me, the words won't come. I can only say that I am yours—all yours." Tears and smiles mingled on her face.

Her emotion affected Dalton. "My sweet love—my—what shall I call you? Don't you think that I should hesitate a long, long time before I asked you to do anything which would bring a shadow to your brow for an hour? But here there is your life's happiness at stake—it sounds selfish I know—but there is my happiness at stake too. You see, Lossie, there always comes a time in our lives when we have to launch out for ourselves, to break the old ties and form new ones."

"I suppose," she sighed, "it is so, and yet it is hard."

Dalton changed the subject abruptly. "Come, little woman, the gloom of the day will get inside after all if we are not careful. Suppose we postpone discussion of the matter until after we have fed. Help me spread the cloth and then run into my room and have a wash while I unpack the basket."

She soon rejoined him. Cold chicken, tongue, salad and tartlets were on the table when she returned. Dalton eyed the provision with dissatisfaction. "It is a pity I didn't arrange for a quiet dinner here instead of a river picnic at this time of the year." He rummaged a cupboard in search of accessories and added a dish of fruit and a bottle of Burgundy to the viands. "Are you a good hand at making coffee, Lossie?" he asked finally as he uncorked the bottle.

She shook her head.

"Then I'll teach you when we have finished. Come, little-one, you must sit opposite me and anticipate the time when you will be sick to death of always having my face before you."

"That time will never come," she replied softly. She was still subdued but the love clouds formed and fled in the clear pleasance of her brow and cheek, where the weather stains had faded somewhat.

Dalton remarked the change that had taken place. "You are not quite the little gipsy you were when you

first came to town," he said. "You have altered wonderfully."

"For better or worse, Frank?"

"I don't know whether you were sweeter as the little brown russet of the past or as the rosebud of to-day."

"The only difference is from the shaded light from the lamp," replied Lossie. She was beginning to recover her spirits.

"I'm glad the town has not taken away your appetite, anyhow."

"I was hungry, Frank. I expect it was that made me so low-spirited."

"Very likely. Now try some Burgundy, and you will soon get rid of the blues."

"Will it get into my head? The brandy I had made me feel quite stupid and sleepy in the train."

"No wonder, it was a truly British poison, but this won't hurt you. Come, I'll give you a toast. Here's to 'Love in Chambers,' sweetheart."

Lossie sipped and smiled.

"I like this better than claret, Frank. It is sweeter."

"There is more of the sun in it, Lossie. An uncomprehending generation declares that there is more body, but that's a mistake. It is more of the soul which is imprisoned."

Lossie looked puzzled. "I don't understand you, Frank. Do you know I am so stupid that I am afraid you will lose patience with me when—when we are married. I know so little of the words you use and the books and things that you take interest in——"

"You child! Suppose I tell you that there is more wisdom to be learned from a pair of pretty lips waiting to be kissed than was ever distilled from the fine drawn mouth of a Solomon. That there is more delight to be found in a maiden's laughter than lurks in the sayings of a century of wits——"

"You are laughing at me, Frank."

“More beauty to be found in one pair of blue eyes than old ocean hides. More joy in one loving embrace than a century of misery can wipe out.”

She listened entranced. She could make no answer save with her eyes.

“Now, you see, I can be eloquent on one subject, dearest.”

“You take my breath away,” she replied. She was aching to answer his caressing words in kind, but the endearing words would not come trippingly.

“I will take it away again with kisses when we have finished our meal, Lottie mine, and meanwhile you can tell me whether you think you can be happy here or whether a tiny cottage in the country would appeal to you more. Some more tongue?”

“Really, I am ashamed to eat so much. You had better think twice before you marry me.”

“Never be ashamed to give the reins to a healthy craving, Lottie. Another glass of Burgundy.”

She passed her glass.

“That’s right. There’s the light of mischief in your eyes, my dear, at last.”

“I feel so happy to be here with you, Frank. I have grown to look on the place as home and—— You know I can always picture it to myself. I can see the table and the books, and I can see you resting in the arm-chair with your hand at your forehead pulling away at that little curl. I must break you of that habit, Frank, for I’m sure some day you will pull it off, and I should not love you half so much without it as I do now.”

“So you decide for Barnard’s Inn,” he asked.

“It is not for me to decide,” she answered sweetly. “Where you are I shall be happy.”

“Who’s the flatterer now?” he asked. “Your glass is empty. What, no more? Half a glass, then, nuts are so dry without.”

She let him refill her glass while she said, "I don't flatter, Frank. I only say what I feel."

So they chattered away of the future until the meal was ended, and then, obedient to his wish, she watched him grind the coffee to flour in a little hand mill and boil the sugar and water over the spirit lamp and, when the coffee was made, she tasted for the first time the fragrant liquid as made in the East. Then pulling a wide chesterfield in front of the fire he made the girl comfortable with cushions, and drawing the curtains to shut out the last struggling gleams of the day, which had died a couple of hours before sunset under the enveloping fog, he seated himself sedately in the arm-chair beside her.

It was hard to watch her and remain passive. He had lighted a cigarette but the fragrant circles which floated in the air failed of their wonted soothing effect. They could not veil from him the girl's perfect form, almost oriental in its voluptuousness. Her pose, too, was sensuous enough to stir the pulse of an anchorite. Her head was sunk in a crimson cushion and her arms thrown back behind her head accentuated the full curves of the bust. Her body lay in an unfettered curve and her feet and the swelling ankle above, still guiltless of stocking, shone marble-like against a ruddy background. In the silence Dalton could hear his heart beating, and fancied that the throbbing of hers kept time with his own.

The silence became well nigh insupportable. Lossie, lost in a happy dream of the future, did not notice the tension. She broke it.

"Frank, you are sure I shall do right in leaving my father?"

He was grateful for the change in the current of his thought.

"Thinking of that again, dear? What a conscientious little mortal you are, to be sure."

"There is one more reason for leaving that I have not told you yet."

"Well," he said watching her face hungrily.

"I—I don't quite like to do so," she faltered.

"You must tell me all your thoughts, dearest. Remember you have promised to be mine."

"I can't realise it yet, and I'm half ashamed to say what I suspect."

"Come, dear, tell me." His tone became one of grave insistence. "You and I must have no reservations."

She gathered confidence. "I'm foolish in some things. I think you have made me vain, Frank."

"That's not the trouble, surely?" he asked smiling.

"May-be it is vanity which has made me fancy that Mr. Nicholas cares too much for me, and takes too much notice."

Dalton rapped out an oath and sprang to his feet. "If another of that d——d family comes into my path I'll——"

"Hush, Frank," said Lossie. "I don't fear him. But—but it has seemed to me that father would be glad if—if—that father encourages him. That's what worries me."

At last she had rid herself of the thought which had haunted her.

"My poor little girl," said Frank caressingly as he seated himself beside her on the couch. "What a fool I have been to think that my little rosebud could hide its sweetness and beauty even in that old house by the river. Some one was bound to try and gain her to wear in his own heart."

Lossie nestled to him contentedly. She felt relieved now that her fear was shared with another. "It may be only a girl's fancy, Frank. But, indeed, I wouldn't have anyone even think that there was a chance of their taking away a particle of my love for you."

“My own dear love——” Her head was resting on his arm. Their lips met in a long rapturous kiss.

“I’m not worthy of so much love, Lossie.”

The pressure of her hand answered the pressure of his. Passion was knocking at her heart. She was carried away from reality, she was floating in a sea of light and love and rapture. The pallor of passion had replaced the roses in her cheek and her eyes looked up languorously from under the long dark lashes half veiling them. Dalton kindled, and in the fire his resolutions withered like straw. The life of the grape pulsed in both their veins.

His lips met hers again. The seconds were weighted with the joys of eternity.

“Lossie,” he said. His voice was hoarse, commanding. More of instinct than of will she sought to put away the hand which loosened the brooch at her throat.

“Frank, you will despise me afterwards.” Her voice throbbed meltingly.

“Never,” he whispered, “never, my dear, dear love.”

His hand lay upon her heart and her heart rose up to meet it.

CHAPTER XXVI

THEY had been so unconscious of the passage of time that the big bell of St. Paul's boomed out eleven as Lossie and Dalton passed under the shadow of the cathedral on their way back to the wharf.

"How late it is," said Lossie hastening her steps. "Father will be so angry."

"What does it matter?" replied Frank. "You are really mine now, Lossie."

The tide of colour which surged in her cheeks was not visible in the dull light of the lamps that filtered through the fog as she answered, "Frank, dear, why will you taunt me?"

He caught her in his arms and kissed her. "You are my wife, Lossie. Call me husband."

Tremulously, almost reverently she whispered the words, "My husband".

"All in all to each other, Lossie."

"All in all to each other, Frank."

The compact was sealed with kisses.

A wave of emotion is soon broken. Its spray falls back into the sea from whence it emerges leaving the rock of the commonplace barely damp. They walked on again and Dalton remarked, "To-morrow morning I will go to the registrar's office and give the notice for our wedding. We can dispense with the church's blessing, can't we?"

Lossie squeezed his arm. "So long as your love is mine, Frank, I care little for aught else."

"In three weeks' time my name will be yours also.

You see, dear, the world does not speak kindly of the women who set its conventions at defiance."

Lossie made no reply save with another pressure upon his arm. It was just that he should give her his name, for she had given to him all that maiden may give man but she did not care much. In spite of the fog and the lateness of the hour they lingered long over their parting, for his final words were full of comfort.

"You will never forget that you are my wife, darling. If anything should happen to make you afraid, come straight to me. It will be a dear delight to protect you. I would have had you stay to-night and always ——"

"No, no, Frank," she interrupted. "You must not tempt me. I must get father used to the idea of being without me. I could not leave him at a moment's notice."

"Let me tell him to-night," he urged.

She refused vehemently. "I would rather tell him myself. I have been away all day, perhaps he might not understand."

Dalton realised her fear that Grove might be drunk and forebore to press his desire. "Please yourself, sweetheart," he said, "but remember that a month is the very longest that I will spare you."

Lossie would have told her father of her promise to Dalton that same night, but he was not alone. Saunders was keeping Philip, and a bottle of rum, company. The bottle was nearly empty and the two men were slightly incoherent in their speech.

Lossie was always plunging headlong from happiness into misery, but on this occasion the taste of happiness was too pungent to be lost. It made her heedless of the heavy inanities of her father and his companion, and later when she had performed Grove's duties and seen him safely to bed, it blotted out everything else.

A bride disrobing on the bridal night never blushed more than Lossie did as she put off her clothes before lying down on her solitary couch. As she stood before the mirror she felt again the glow of burning

kisses and hastily covered her bare shoulders. But she glanced again. She saw herself afresh—with Dalton's eyes—as Galatea, palpitating with new-found life. "I am glad that I am beautiful," she whispered to herself, and bending her head she kissed the spot where "his" lips had rested. "I am glad I am beautiful since my beauty has brought me him." The thought dwelt with her while she brushed her tresses in the light of the candle. Later, when she slept, she dreamed that he held her in his arms, and when she awoke in the darkness and knew that she was alone, she blushed for her dream but knew that a tear trickled down her cheek for the disillusionment.

Neither the next day not the many that followed brought to her any sense of shame. She loved and had given herself to her lover. He called her wife; she named him husband. Love was the law, spiritual and temporal, which bound them together. Her voice was sweeter, fuller toned; the love-light shone always in her eyes; the gaiety of a thankful heart dwelt in the temple of her body and lightened her every word and gesture.

She had told her father the next morning that Dalton had asked her to marry him, and that she had consented. She had hardly expected him to welcome the news, but she was scarcely prepared for his comment.

"Zhure, ee be a dom'd ongrateful zlip of a wench."

She replied rather tartly, "Why, father, you don't expect me to be hanging round your neck for ever, do you?"

"Youm be like the rest ov 'em. Stickin' to th' old stump ontill ee vinds a likelier stick to 'ang thee petticoat onto, an' then off ee goes never thinking what'll happen to th' old prop."

Philip flung away after this speech without waiting for a reply, and left his daughter in tears. She could not argue the matter with him that night, for he was

drunk again and spoke to her roughly. But she did not mention the matter to Dalton. Indeed, when she was with him, she did not think of her troubles. She spent every moment she could spare with him. She surprised him in the morning, she called at his chambers in the afternoon, and once or twice she managed to spend the evening with him. In fact, every moment that she could spare from her work was spent at Bernard's Inn. One morning she called so early—Dalton had provided her with a duplicate key to his rooms—that when Mrs. Wilcox arrived she found Lossie preparing breakfast. The laundress greeted the girl with a stage curtsy and the remark "I 'opes I sees you well, me ldy, an' that you've 'ad a restful night".

Dalton came to Lossie's relief. "Now then, Pollie, stow that sort of nonsense or you and I will have to part."

The woman went to the door and flung it open. "So it 'as come to that, 'as it? So that is what gettin' fine feathers for fine birds means, does it? I'm an honest woman, Mr. D., I'd 'ave you know, an' if I'd thought you was a-goin' to rope me in to 'elpin' yer make a fool of this child, I'd 'ave slung my 'ook long since."

Dalton recognised the woman's point of view and checked the angry retort which rose to his lips. "I think you are mistaken, Pollie," he remarked quietly. "In another week or two I shall be proud to introduce you to Mrs. Dalton."

The woman's tone changed instantly. "Well, if yer means the honest thing, Gord bless yer both, I says. After all, young people can't 'elp anticipatin' a little. It's natur', I says, an' I ought to know, for my first was a seven-month child, an' the doctor said as 'ow it was most surprisin' that ee should be so big an——"

Dalton mindful of Lossie's crimsoned face cut short further reminiscences with a threat to drown her in the bath if she continued. "Lossie's only just come in," he explained.

Mrs. Wilcox turned to Lossie reproachfully. "I'd ha' thought as you might 'ave taken me into your confidence," she said. "I promised to be a friend and it seems to me as yer wants one."

Lossie faltered an excuse. "It was only last Sunday that we decided and I've seen so little of you since."

Pollie Wilcox was a keen-sighted little woman, and she accepted the excuse. "There, there, my little rose-bud, yer needn't waste yer blushes on an old ballet girl. I can guess all about it. A pair of fools the two of yer are, but bless us, it's folly makes the world go round." She turned to the girl and began to talk in a low tone.

"I can see that when we are married, I shall have to keep my wife away from you, you old gossip," said Dalton jokingly.

The woman turned on him sharply. "Go out for a walk, Mr. Dalton, and leave me to talk to the child. Never a mother 'as she 'ad and no woman friend. It might be well for me to talk to her."

Frank's eyes glistened. "You've a rough tongue, Pollie," he said, "but I think you are true. I think I may trust you to mother my motherless bride." With that he left them together, and Lossie poured out her heart to the elder woman. It was a relief to speak to one of her own sex. She was brighter than ever afterwards.

So the days flew by. Grove became sullenly acquiescent, and Lossie hopeful of winning him to a more cheerful frame of mind, still postponed the day of her wedding. Nicholas Ryeland was apparently engrossed in business and forbore to pursue her. Pollie Wilcox was ever sympathetic. Dalton became more ardent at every meeting. She blossomed in the sunshine of those happy days. She showed her happiness so clearly that people turned in the street to look after her; women with care at their hearts, envious of the joy beaming in the fair young face; men with the longing that such glances should be awakened by them.

CHAPTER XXVII

"GROVE! GROVE!" An office boy was shouting his name shrilly as Philip emerged from beneath the archway.

"What be squealin' vor like that, youngster?" he asked. "Do ee think I be deaf as one o' thee tarnation Lunnon stwuns?"

"The boss wants yer in the orfice immejit," answered the boy, adding as he scampered away, "I reckon yer in fer a wiggin'."

Grove proceeded slowly towards the office muttering to himself, "I mought a knowed as ee'd vind I out avore long. Now, I s'pose as we-uns 'ull 'ave to zhift again." He came to a pause in the middle of the yard. "I 'ull be all alone this time. Th' little-un 'ull be vor marryin' that dom'd Dalton chap an' a zettin up vor a lady. She wo-unt want no truck with zuch as I, th' little baggage."

He came into Nicholas Ryeland's presence with a defiant look on his face and a careless swing of his shoulders.

"Shut the door, Grove," said the employer cheerfully as the man entered and, when his bidding was done, he proceeded, "I've something to say to you that I don't want the whole office to hear."

Philip felt more comfortable. Ryeland's tone was not that of an angry master, but his next words renewed Philip's uneasiness.

"I don't think your life here quite suits you," remarked Ryeland.

Grove stammered out a denial. "Maybe I be-unt

zuited to ee, zur, but zo var as I be consarned I do-unt wish vor better quarters."

"Perhaps not," replied Ryeland, "but—but they are telling me that you are sometimes taking a drop too much to drink, Grove."

Again Grove stammered out a denial, but he had not got far with it before his employer stopped him sharply.

"You need not attempt to argue the matter, Grove. I am not disposed at the present moment to treat the matter too seriously, for I can understand how difficult you must find this life when you have been accustomed to the open air. No doubt you have found things a bit dull and thought there was no harm in taking a drop of something to liven you up. But you must be careful, you know; habits like that grow on a man."

The fatherly tone of the exordium would have amazed the clerks in the outer office if they could have heard it. Not thus were their delinquencies wont to be treated. It seemed remarkable even to Philip. He had nothing to say in reply.

"You must remember Lossie—your daughter," continued Nicholas.

Grove found his speech, answering sullenly, "Th' little-un be-unt carin' a dom what 'appens to I, an' why zhould I be a thinkin' ov her? She's vor marryin' a swell in a vortnight or zo."

"What?" cried Nicholas, "what?" The information had taken him wholly by surprise, and it was with difficulty he succeeded in controlling his features as he continued sharply, "You cannot be speaking the truth, Grove".

"Thur be-unt no call vor I to lie to ee, Measter Nicholas," replied Grove doggedly.

Ryeland rose and paced up and down the office. He soon recovered his composure, though when he spoke again there was a savage note in his voice as he inquired for particulars.

Philip told him of Dalton's recognition of him on the river and of the development of the intimacy since his settlement at the wharf. Ryeland learned from him also particulars of Dalton's connection with Graysbourne and had no difficulty in identifying him with the Frank Dalton of whom he had heard as a suitor for his sister's hand.

"I suppose your prospective son-in-law will be prepared to do something for you?" asked Nicholas when he had elicited from Grove all that he knew in regard to Dalton.

"I haven't hearn him say nothin'," replied Philip gruffly. "I do reckon as I 'ull 'ave to look after myself."

"Then why don't you put a stop to this nonsense at once?" inquired Ryeland.

"What be th' use o' words when a maid's vancy be zet on a wedd'n," replied Philip sullenly.

Nicholas made no answer, and thinking the interview ended, Philip turned to depart. Ryeland motioned him to remain.

"One moment, Grove," he said. "Sit you down, man, and let us chat over this matter quietly, for it is easy to see that you don't wish to lose your daughter, and perhaps I may be able to do something to assist you."

Grove looked at him irresolutely. He did not see any use in discussing the matter, nevertheless he seated himself on a corner of a chair and gnawed his knuckle. Meanwhile Ryeland was bringing all his wits to work on the problem as to how he might best prevent this wedding. Hitherto he had been merely amusing himself by teasing the girl with attentions which he did not think she seriously resented. But now that he learned that he had a rival he felt very much as a gardener would feel who, after watching his choicest peach ripen on the wall, sees it plucked and carried off by a stranger. Fortunately, he thought, he had been warned in time to prevent the robbery, and he saw the advantage he would

have if he could get Philip on his side. And to bring about this desirable result he could think of no more likely means than by appealing to the man's self-interest. He broke the silence by the inquiry, "Did Lossie tell you, Grove, that two or three days ago I asked her if she would like to be housekeeper for me at a little place I was thinking of taking down in Surrey?"

Philip stared at him in amazement as he replied slowly, "Noa, never a word did th' little baggage zay to I about it".

Ryeland walked to a cupboard and took a tantalus and a couple of glasses from the shelf. "Talking is dry work, Grove," he said.

The caretaker's eyes glistened as his employer poured out for him a liberal allowance of the spirit. He rose, scraped the floor with his foot and made an awkward acknowledgment before half emptying his glass at a gulp.

"H—m! It was hardly fair of her not to have told you, was it?" asked Nicholas. "Don't you think you could persuade her to accept? She is very young to be married, you know, and she wouldn't come to any harm with both you and I to look after her."

Philip shuffled uneasily. "Th' little-un do zay as 'ow she be aveard on ee, zur. Her zeems to 'ave got into her yud that youm be not meanin' the right thing by her," he said.

Nicholas laughed, though a trifle unsteadily. "Oh! I suppose she thinks too much of those little attentions I have paid her. I always looked upon her as such a child that I hardly expected to hear that she thought a second time about my kissing her."

"Just what I did tell her," remarked Grove.

"I'm sure you will realise," continued Ryeland, "that if I did intend any harm to the girl I should hardly take you into my confidence."

"That's zartain zhure," agreed Philip.

"Of course," continued Ryeland. "The fact is, I had you just as much in my thoughts as Lossie when I told her that I could find you a home where you might both be happy. It is just the place to suit you. There's a bit of land you could manage with a man under you, and she would have hardly anything to do, as I should only be able to come down occasionally. I think she might at least have mentioned my suggestion to you."

"It were more'n onkind," declared Philip finishing his liquor. "What th' hussy do want is a taste o' th' strap to bring her to her zenses, though her be zo zot on that chap as I be aveard that nowt ud do it, not even strap oil."

"I don't want you to use any such violent methods," replied Nicholas. "Let us only get her down into the country and you will see that she will very soon forget this girlish fancy."

"Zhure I do-unt know 'ow I be to zet about it," remarked Grove.

Ryeland saw that he had created the impression he had intended to produce and set to work to clinch it. "Of course," he said "if I thought that this marriage would be a good thing for you both I would not have said a word. But directly you mentioned the name of Dalton—well, you see, I happen to know something about him. I should advise you not to entrust your daughter to him, Grove, I should indeed."

Philip rose. "I'll straight to th' lass an' tell her as she's to 'ave nowt more to do wi' un," he said. He was all alive to get to work.

Ryeland thought it wise to curb his impatience. "Wait, wait," he advised. "If you set about the business in such a hurry the chances are twenty to one that you will bring about exactly what this Dalton would like. Just at the moment she may be so infatuated with the man, that if you forbid her to see him she is just as likely to run straight away to him and never come back. Where would you be then?"

Philip looked helplessly at his employer. "Zhure ee be wiser nor I, Measter Nicholas," he said. "Maybe you ud be tellin' I what to do."

"Well, I hardly know what to propose," said Ryeland. "When did you say she was going to be married?"

"At virst 'twas to be this next week, but when she zeed as I were pained like, they've vixed it up vor th' week avore Christmas."

"There's plenty of time then," remarked Nicholas. "I am going away for two or three days to Graysbourne, for my sister's wedding, and I shall have thought of something before I come back, no doubt."

"An' what be I to do, zur?" asked Philip.

"Nothing," declared Ryeland decidedly. "Do nothing to let her know that you are taking steps to save her from her own folly. Treat her kindly. Of course there's no reason why you should not tell her sometimes that you never thought that she would leave you, and you might hint that you are certain that this Dalton is not quite all that her fancy paints him and——"

"Aye, zur," said Philip as Ryeland paused.

"Well you might hint too, cautiously, that she can do much better for herself by trusting to you and to me."

Ryeland's hesitation over the conclusion of his advice raised a wave of suspicion in Grove's mind. "I think I be understandin'," he replied, "and I do think you be meanin' kindly by th' little-un an' I, but Lord A'mighty help thee if you be deceivin' of we." He drew his great figure together and braced his muscles on the back of one of the office bentwood chairs. "If zo be as you be tryin' to come over I to get th' lass for a zhort time's pleasurin' it's a heavy reckonin' you 'ull be payin' Measter."

The chair rails snapped under his grip. Ryeland laughed lightly and held out his hand to the man. "So be it, Grove," he said, "give me your hand upon it."

Philip took the offered palm shamefacedly with droop-

ing eyes and half-averted head. He felt intuitively that he was conspiring against Lossie's happiness. But he could not draw back. The hands of the two men met and a coin remained in Philip's. It burned his flesh. He felt a momentary longing to dash it in the face of the man who had bestowed it upon him, but instead he pocketed it and went quietly out of the room.

He could not meet Lossie at that moment. Instead he went out into Thames Street and found his way into the Friar's Head. It was too early in the afternoon for any of his usual cronies to be found in the bar, so he was able to hide his face behind a newspaper and think over the conversation which had just taken place. He ordered some whisky to assist him in his deliberations, and tendered the coin he had just received in payment.

"You're flush to-day," remarked the barman as he handed over change out of a sovereign.

Philip grunted out an unintelligible reply and seated himself in a corner. He sat there in silence for an hour. The whisky excited him, besides making his mind easy. The effect was much superior to the dulling intoxication of beer. He treated himself to another glass and returned to Peter's Wharf with a smile on his face. He would prove to Lossie that he was able to look after her welfare.

Lossie was glad to see him in so cheerful a mood. She responded to it and prattled away merrily whilst she poured out tea for him.

"I thought you had forgotten how to laugh, father," she told him when the meal was finished. "It is so long since I have seen you look really merry."

Philip thought he saw a chance of saying an effective word. "Zhure, ee do-unt think as I could be 'appy when I wor thinkin' o' losin' my little-un?"

"But you look happy to-day. I knew you would get used to the idea for it isn't as if you were going to lose me altogether," she said.

"All the same, I do-unt half like your wedd'n that Dalton chap vor all ee's zo zoft spoken," he continued.

"And what strange fancy have you got in your head now," laughed the girl. "You don't like Frank—you don't like me marrying him? You don't know him or you would never speak so."

"It do-unt zeem natural vor un to marry out ov un's station," explained Philip.

"True," said Lossie, her eyes beaming. "It does seem strange that he should want to marry poor little me. He is so handsome——"

"'Andsome is as 'andsome does," growled Philip.

"And so good and so clever," continued the girl, "that I'm wondering all the time what makes him love me."

"Love ee," snapped Philip contemptuously, "maid's talk!"

"Maid's talk or not," answered Lossie with a blush, "it's sweet to think about."

"All vuleishness," retorted Grove. "If anybody else were to chatter the zame 'twould seem just as sweet, I reckon."

Lossie shook her head vigorously. "Ah! No, no, no——"

"Now I do reckon as Measter Nicholas do 'ave a more plasin' way," said Philip judicially.

"Pleasing!" said Lossie warmly. "He's the most hateful man I ever met. I detest him."

"Maid's talk again," replied Philip. "All the zame, I do reckon as 'ow you could twist un round thee little vinger if thee put thee mind to it, vor thee bist a good-lookin' wench."

Lossie's face flushed scarlet. "How can you speak to me so?" she asked hotly, "knowing that I am promised to Frank." A faint suspicion found harbourage for a moment in her mind. "Has Mr. Nicholas been telling you to praise him to me?"

Philip was abashed and sought the easiest way out of

the difficulty. "Lord love ee' little-un. Zweetheartin' do make ee touchy if ee can't stand a bit of a joke."

Lossie dismissed the half-formed suspicion from her mind. "I'm sorry if I spoke hastily, father, but though it may seem foolish maid's talk to you, Frank's love is the whole of my life, and I don't like to joke about it. It's like a religion to me."

She went to his side and placed her hand upon his shoulder caressingly. "Let me sit on your knee, father, as I used to do in the old days, and tell you all I have thought."

Philip could not refuse. "Aye, come lass, I'm listenin'," he said.

The girl's arm dropped naturally round his neck and her face was turned away from him as she spoke.

"Indeed, and indeed it is my religion," said Lossie earnestly. "In the morning when I awake the first thought which comes into my head is of Frank. I step across to the window and the ripples on the water, flashing in the sunlight remind me of his smile. While I'm about my work I can hear his voice and I want to sing. Can you guess what I fancy he says." Her voice sank to a whisper. "He says what the 'bells of St. Paul's always say, 'Los-sie Dal-ton, Los-sie Dal-ton'." Her voice grew clear again. "When I sit down in the afternoon, and when I am alone in the evenings, he seems to be so near me that I can almost feel his kisses."

Philip's conscience was awakening but Lossie was so intent upon her reverie that she did not notice the expression in his face.

"I've wanted for so long to tell you how happy I feel but I have been afraid lest I should hurt you, for though I know you would like your little-one to be happy, yet it will be a grief for us to be parted. I've been afraid lest you should think me ungrateful, but I cannot help it. Frank has come into my life and noth-

ing that I could do would bring back the Lossie who a few months ago came drifting into London on the barge without thought for anyone in the world but her dear old father."

Philip could only frame an inarticulate grunt in reply.

"You must not think that Frank has robbed you of my love," continued Lossie earnestly. "It is deeper than ever it was, only it is not the same I give to him. I have been thinking a great deal lately and I know"—her voice was full of passionate conviction—"I know that if he were calling me and the whole world strove to hold me back I should break free and go to him."

She was silent for a minute before she resumed more quietly, "I suppose it's like that with all of us. I suppose there must come a time to every girl when she feels something calling to her, something which bids her give up the old for the new, something she has not even dreamed about in the past."

Philip sighed. His conscience pricked him for having given a thought to anything which would militate against his daughter's happiness. "Aye, little-un," he said. "All the zame it be a bit rough on we old uns to be zet back on th' shelf 'longzide th' cracked mugs an' th' broken toys."

To that Lossie could make no answer.

CHAPTER XXVIII

REGRETFULLY Nicholas Ryeland allowed his plans for Lossie's subjugation to remain incomplete while he left town to fulfil his promise to be present at his sister's wedding. Yet though he had not been anxious to attend the function, Ruth Ryeland had counted very much upon his arrival. Although she had to all appearances resigned herself to the inevitable, yet in her heart she still cherished a hope that at the last moment some means of escape would present itself. As the days had gone by and nothing had happened she grew heart-sick.

She had seen very little of her brother since he had left the family circle for a London merchant's office, and on the few occasions when she had paid a visit to him she had observed nothing to make her understand that he was in any way different from the boy who had gone away with a certain number of ideals as part of his equipment for the battle of life. At least so far as her memory served her he had had some ideals. She remembered dimly that he had talked to her, his big-eyed little sister, of all he meant to do and the vague impression remaining in her mind was that he would do nothing which was not in strict accord with the highest principles. He was a man, too, and one who knew the world. He was strong in mind and will or he would never have won success. Surely, then, if anyone could help her, he could. She had thought of writing to him, but though a dozen times or more she took up a pen for the purpose the letter was never written. She could not write a story which showed herself so weak. But she had determined at the very first moment she saw

him to tell him her position and ask him to find some way out of the difficulty for her.

Accordingly, on the day of his arrival at the farm she was early on the lookout. She was waiting at the gate for half an hour before the trap which was to bring him from the railway station could possibly arrive. When the trap made its appearance without him, the fear lest something had prevented him at the last moment from fulfilling his promise turned her sick with disappointment. His wife and child had come, but Ruth had very few sympathies in common with Mrs. Nicholas Ryeland. When she heard her father say that her brother had got out of the trap to walk part of the way across the fields to renew his almost forgotten memories of farm life, her hope reasserted itself instantaneously. She knew the way he would come and she started at once to meet him.

The afternoon was settling into dusky twilight when she saw him coming through a field of late mangold with the long swinging stride of perfect health. She awaited him at the gate and he, recognising her as he approached, came towards her with a cheery shout.

After the first greetings she turned to accompany him home.

"I hardly expected to meet you here, sis," he said lightly. "I suppose you came out to dream alone of the happiness of wedded bliss." He looked at her with a laugh in his eyes as he spoke and was astonished at the gloom which spread over her face and dulled her eyes. "Why, what's the matter?" he continued, "anyone would think you were going to a funeral rather than to your own wedding."

"I wish I were." Her attitude held something of the tragic, and gazing at her drooping head silhouetted against the grey horizon, Nicholas felt a momentary uneasiness. He tried to speak lightly.

"Come, this won't do, sis. Nobody would imagine

that you were the envy of half the girls in the county."

"I don't think they would envy me if they only knew," remarked Ruth.

"If they only knew what?" asked Nicholas sharply, and as she did not reply he began to extol the advantages she would gain by such a match. Dimly she heard him expatiate on the luxury she would enjoy, the position she would occupy and the pleasures which would be at her command.

She stopped him with "There is no need to taunt me with the fetters I shall wear".

He laughed aloud. "Fetters?" he said. "Fetters? They are fetters every sensible man and woman makes haste to put on. You are wrong to speak of the fetters of riches. I always think of wealth as a golden key, for I am very certain none other will open the gate to liberty."

For a while she made no answer. There was coming to her the consciousness that she could not expect sympathy from her brother, much less help. The night already lapping the eastern horizon was gathering over her too, a black night unrelieved by a single star gleam.

"A strange conception your liberty must be," she remarked at last.

"A perfectly rational one," he replied, "and I am sure you will agree with me once you have unlocked the door." He took no notice of her "No" as he continued, "I rather wonder at your talking like this, you know, after you have acted so sensibly in accepting Rawlins. Of course, girls are always romantic and all that sort of thing, and I should judge from the little I have seen of my brother-in-law that is to be that he is not a very romantic person; still I am inclined to think that a good balance at the bank is worth all the romance in the world."

"I believe there is more romance about him than there is about you, Nick," she said bitterly.

"Probably there is, sis," he said in the tone of one who receives a compliment. "There's so little of that sort of nonsense about me that it is quite possible that you have my share and your own as well. Anyhow, let me advise you to take your romance in fiction, it only makes the waters of real life muddy."

His matter of fact tone stung her into a sudden declaration. "Romance or no romance, I cannot marry Mr. Rawlins. Nick, I want you to help me to get out of it."

Her brother stopped in his stride and looked at her curiously. "'Pon my word," he began then stopped and laughed. "Have you forgotten that even now the marriage feast is preparing."

Her voice became imploring. "You will help me, Nicholas? You will?"

Though Nicholas had gathered from his mother's letters that this was no love match he had not realised until this moment that by some means or other his sister had been cajoled or forced into acceptance of her reverend admirer's suit. But even when realising the position of affairs he only thought the importance attributed to the matter by his sister a mere piece of feminine hysteria which would speedily pass away. He had been commissioned by his father to make inquiries into Rawlins' means and prospects and he had been delighted at what he had discovered. For his own part he was only too glad that his sister should marry the rector, and he had not the slightest intention of throwing any obstacles in the way.

"This is too childish of you, Ruth," he said. "Even if Rawlins is not a novelette hero he is a decent sort of fellow and he will give you a position and a home such as you will never have another chance of securing."

"I have heard those arguments a thousand times," she replied vehemently.

"You must not let any trifling disagreement upset

you at this moment," he continued. "You don't want to make yourself a laughing stock for everybody."

"There is no disagreement," she replied. "If you will only listen to me one minute I will tell you how I was forced into accepting him——" She paused.

"Well?" he said. He was really curious as to the reason.

Briefly as she could, though with many halts, she narrated the history of the Reverend Robert's wooing, terminating with the story of the letter she had written him and the threat he had made regarding it. Almost unconsciously she had mentioned Dalton's name, and her brother's interest was enchained at once.

"Was there any warrant for his suggestion regarding this Mr. Dalton?" he asked her.

She flamed out a negative, and succeeded it by an impassioned eulogy of Dalton.

Nicholas was silent. He had stumbled upon a complication he had not foreseen. His sister still loved the man whom he knew to be his own rival. Supposing he were successful in his suit and by one of those unforeseen chances which are always occurring in life Dalton and Ruth should meet. Well, there was only one thing to do, and that was to put an insuperable barrier of pride and jealousy between them. He thought he knew enough of women to enable him to be fairly assured of success. He laid his hand on her arm and said gently, "You will forgive me asking the question, Ruth, but I happen to have heard something of this Dalton fellow, and when you mentioned his name I felt a momentary dread that you might have been one of his victims".

"You—have—heard——" She could say no more.

"Only a few days ago," he continued gravely, "and—it is just as well for you to know what sort of a fate you have escaped—the fact is"—once committed to it the lie gathered volume in his mouth—"the fact

is, I met him with a half acquaintance of mine in a wine bar."

"You were there," she retorted.

"I don't pretend to be a teetotaller, my dear," he replied, "but I should be ashamed of myself if I ever got into the condition he was. But that's not what I was going to tell you. I happened to mention something about Graysbourne, and when he heard the name he caught at it and finally informed me with a wink and a leer that I was not the first of the natives of Graysbourne that he had met in town."

"Well?" Her tone was getting hard.

"I pressed him for particulars then, and finally—Do you remember the Groves? The father left here with his daughter. What was her name—Lottie, or something like that?"

"Yes," she replied. She had an idea now of what was coming.

"My dear girl, if you had heard his maudlin raptures over the girl's physical perfections you would know what sort of a fate you had escaped."

"Oh! It cannot be true. It cannot be true," she wailed. The entreaty in her voice effectually destroyed any compunction he had felt, for it revealed a very clear danger if by any chance his sister should ever meet Dalton again.

"Unfortunately it was only too true," he said, still with admirably assumed gravity. "I made my own inquiries. I don't know that the girl is to be pitied, for, by all accounts, there is little to choose between them. She, I have heard, is as proud as a duchess at having found a gentleman to keep her, and she had nearly broken her father's heart by leaving him. Indeed, I was so sorry for the man that I sought him out and have taken him into my own employment."

Ruth believed him. The circumstantial detail was too great to permit of any idea that the story was a

concoction. Besides, Nicholas could have had no object in inventing such a tale.

"I—I used to be so fond of Lossie, too," she cried.

Her disillusionment was complete. Her heart had grown cold. Night had fallen completely. Nothing more was said until the lights of the farmhouse appeared before them. Then just before they entered she caught him by the arm and, in a voice as hard as the ring of metal on ice, she said to him, "Nick, you have converted me. I choose luxury. Romance is dead."

He stooped and brushed her brow with his lips. "That's sensible of you, sis," he said. "Start afresh with a blank page and write on it what you will. It's only when you are free from the trammels of romance that you can begin to enjoy life."

Ruth amazed them all that evening by her high spirits. The disregard for the preparations for the wedding had passed away. There was something hysterical in her excitement, but that passed unnoticed save by her mother, who saw nothing remarkable in a little hysteria under such circumstances. Not until she was alone in her bedroom did she venture to think over the story her brother had told her. Up to that evening she had dreamed still of meeting "Frank" again. She pronounced his name aloud. "Frank, my Frank," punctuating her repetition with little scornful laughs. She felt hardened to acceptance of her fate and glanced almost fondly upon the glittering pledge upon her arm for the first time since Rawlins had placed it there. She viewed her reflection in the mirror as if she expected to see quite another being to the girl who had looked at her from the glass in the morning. She went nearer, lit more candles, and examined the reflection closely. "It is the same Ruth," she muttered, and again her lips curled in a laugh. "No," she continued, "that

laugh is new," and she gave herself up to studying the fresh effect. So she postured awhile until her mother came to kiss her good-night.

Mrs. Ryeland dropped one or two tears on the pillow where the fair locks rested. "Good-night, dearie," she said. "We shall miss you sorely when you are gone."

"Do you think so?" replied the girl, unresponsive to the emotion. "I should think you would be glad for I've made a terrible nuisance of myself lately."

"Ah! well," answered the mother sagely, "young birds are always timorous of leaving the nest."

"I'm not afraid now, mother."

"That's my bonnie girl. May you be happy, dear."

"I shall be all right," answered Ruth. "You needn't worry about me."

"I'm sure it's all for the best," remarked Mrs. Ryeland with pious thankfulness. "Mind you sleep well and look your best in the morning."

Mrs. Ryeland went back to her chamber and added to her customary devotional exercises a special thanksgiving to the Almighty for sending her daughter a husband so worthy. She had no qualms, not even the suspicion that everything was not as it should be crossed her mind. Ruth's manner had quite reassured her, and if she had not behaved exactly as she had expected, she had repeated the formula, "Young people are so different now to what they were in my young days," so often that she quite believed it.

Ruth fell asleep despite the fact that deep down in her heart a dull pain throbbed. She had no tears. Once in the darkness she awoke dreaming that she was married and, touching a cold hand, scarcely restrained a scream. The change of posture which she made involuntarily in her fright revealed to her that she had mistaken her own arm, cramped and chilled by her position, for that of a bedfellow. She shuddered, won-

dering how she would be able to endure the reality, but she soon fell asleep again and forgot.

In the morning she was the coolest and most collected person in the farmhouse, laughing—the new bitter laugh—at the flurry and bustle. Once she seemed so amused at the pother created by the search for some garment which had gone astray, that she almost awoke resentment in her mother and the girls who were engaged in searching for it.

When they remonstrated with her she replied: “I wasn’t laughing at you, mother. I was thinking what you would do if the bride were missing when you make so much fuss about a lost petticoat.”

“What do you mean?” cried several voices.

“Oh!” she answered nonchalantly, “suppose I were to steal out and tumble into the pond, or——”

When the horrified chorus of “Ohs!” and “How can you?” had subsided, she continued with a renewal of her laughter, “You needn’t be afraid at my doing anything so foolish. But can’t you imagine the bridegroom’s face getting longer and longer——”

“Hush, Ruth,” said Mrs. Ryeland. “Think of what Robert would suffer if he heard you making fun of him in such a way on your wedding morning.”

“Perhaps I shall never have the chance again,” replied the girl with hypocritical penitence.

Soon the guests began to arrive and the farm hands were busy stabling the horses while thinking of the feast with which they were to be regaled later on in the day, for Ryeland had determined, as he expressed it, “to do the thing handsomely,” and the whole of the villagers had been invited to a feast in one of the great barns, to which they were to sit down at the same time as the wedding party in the house.

The hours passed and the farm became quiet as the guests made their way to the church. Ruth, standing at the window of her room, saw the group gathered at

the lych gate of the church and knew that her hour had come. A nervous tremor shook her frame, a recurrence of the shuddering disgust which had thrilled her limbs when she awoke the previous night. Her father was shouting for her on the stairs, and the bridesmaids were gathered in an expectant group on the landing outside the door. She shrugged her shoulders, went down stairs and, taking her father's arm, stepped out bravely.

There was no hitch in the ceremony. Ruth's responses were clear to all the participants, and Rawlins bore himself with all the dignity that his sixty-four inches would allow. A due contribution of rice enveloped them as they came down the path from the church door, while the organ pealed out the wedding march and the new peal of bells in the belfry started an agitated clatter.

The proceedings had seemed so remotely to affect herself that Ruth had been amused by them. It had not seemed to her that she was indeed the principal figure therein. She had kept her head bent during the service, yet she had noted a number of trivial details which made for laughter. Thus the important face of her father, surmounting expansive linen and beaming broadcloth, seemed ridiculous to her. Her mother's perturbations and flutterings had made her almost irritable until she remembered that she was naturally anxious about the new black silk, "which can stand alone, my dear," and then she felt hardly capable of restraining her laughter.

The guests returned speedily in the wake of the newly-married pair and were soon gathered at the breakfast table, the squire being the central figure.

It was all over at last, the cake cut, the bride's health drunk, the travelling costume donned. Father, mother and bridesmaids exhibited the conventional emotion. The rector's brougham bore them away amidst a shower

of slippers and more rice and the beery cheers of the labourers.

Then when the last cottage had been passed the Reverend Robert Rawlins placed his arm round his bride's waist and pressed his lips against hers. She did not respond.

"You are mine at last," he exulted.

"Don't make yourself ridiculous," she answered quietly though the impact of his lips awoke her loathing in full force.

"I never saw you look so well," he said hoping to win a smile. "You did me credit. You looked simply splendid."

He got his smile but it was not a pleasant one. "What a fool a man always looks when he is at a wedding," she remarked, and turning away from him she drew a rug more closely about her.

CHAPTER XXIX

WHILE Nicholas Ryeland was away from the wharf to attend his sister's wedding there was nothing likely to mar Lossie's happiness. But to Philip Grove the days of his employer's absence brought no sense of relief. Rather otherwise in fact. Each and every day as it came was a day of conflict. After he had become the recipient of Lossie's confidences the whole of his better nature had revolted against the bargain he had made with his employer and for which the gold piece had been earnest money. He felt a great longing to seek respite from his thoughts by indulgence in his usual sedative but for a time successfully combated the craving.

He said nothing to his daughter of his conversation with Ryeland. Shame prevented him; the fear, too, that she might learn to hate him. The fear that she, the only person in the world that he loved, might turn from him with disgust. He had enjoyed so little of love in his life. There had been his wife and Lossie, and perhaps the old horses on the farm at Graysbourne—they had always turned their heads towards him when he came near and looked after him when he departed—but no living thing else had ever looked upon him with loving glance. Only Lossie was left. To lose her was to lose everything. Realisation of this inevitably led him to dwell on the suggestion of his employer. Could he not keep his daughter and her love too. May-be it was, as he had told her, only "maid's talk" which made her seem so wrapped up in Dalton. To lose her was to lose everything. He thought he might have faced

the prospect in the village, but to be left in a world he did not know and did not understand to bear the brunt and stress of life alone—the prospect was appalling. He had never been able to get in touch with life in the city. Since his residence in London nothing had been able to tempt him beyond the end of Thames Street. He feared the streets. In the country he was at home, in the city a stranger. If only he could return to the country, where he could walk slowly without fear and feel that he was part of the scheme of things, he would be able to regain his self-respect, partly lost in his pilgrimage, wholly swamped in the city. And this chance would be his if only he could break off this approaching marriage. He put away the thought a thousand times but he could not banish it permanently, and there came a day when he could no longer resist the temptation to drown his troubles at the Friar's Head.

He found a cordial welcome awaiting him from half a dozen acquaintances, among them the man Saunders with whom as caretaker of an adjoining house he had become on almost intimate terms. They drank together, and as Philip still had in his pocket part of the money given him by Ryeland, he treated his acquaintance a number of times. When they parted to get their dinners Grove invited Saunders to spend the evening with him over a pipe.

Lossie had arranged to spend the evening with Dalton, and as she departed she held up her finger and remarked jestingly, "Be sure you don't have a drop too much to-night, father".

The remark was unfortunate, for it roused the old demon in Philip's heart. He turned away muttering to himself, "Why should I trouble what the gel thinks? She's got nothin' but hard words vor I."

He went at once to the Friar's Head in search of Saunders, and still smarting under the effect of Lossie's

words, purchased a bottle of whisky with malicious satisfaction. Saunders was awaiting him in the bar, and on seeing the purchase had no hesitation in accompanying Grove to his home forthwith.

The fact that they were neighbours could have been the only reason for Grove making friends with Saunders, for no one, even if blinded with alcohol, could have pronounced him a prepossessing specimen of humanity. He was long and lean. His lips were thin and set closely over pointed teeth. His eyes were pale-blue, watery and red-rimmed. His closely cut hair was the colour of a dust-laden scrubbing-brush. His nose had originally been moulded in the form of a hook, but after being broken with a blow the end had become bulbous with a pink surface mottled with blue. However it pleased Philip to play the part of host—he had so rarely been in the position to do so in the course of his life—and Ned Saunders filled the place of guest as well as any other acquaintance he had made since his coming to the Wharf.

“You’re in clover ’ere, mite,” remarked Saunders, as he fixed himself comfortably in the easiest of the chairs, and filled his pipe, while Philip brought out glasses and sugar and set the kettle on the hob to boil.

“I be-unt wantin’ to change,” growled Philip, “though I do-unt know how long I ’ull be biding.”

Saunders cocked his ears and sat upright.

“Ennybody bin leavin’ yer a forchin?” he asked. “Otherwise I wouldn’t be leavin’ a snug shorp like this. Leastwise if it was mine, that is ter s’y.”

“Let’s talk o’ something else,” said Philip, as he mixed two glasses of whisky and seated himself opposite his guest. They talked of other matters, but by the time they had sipped their second glass Saunders had engineered the conversation skilfully back to the question. And Philip, his tongue loosened by the whisky, was tempted to confide to his companion so many of the

thoughts which troubled him as he could find words to express. Saunders listened intently. He occupied a couple of attics only and his wages were but half the amount received by Grove. He was keen upon any chance of bettering his position.

When Grove had fully explained the position of affairs Saunders strongly advised him to take advantage of Ryeland's offer in spite of the opposition from Lossie. Being much better acquainted with the ways of the world than Grove he easily realised Ryeland's object, and he bluntly spoke his thoughts to his host. But he was not prepared for the outburst he excited.

"The measter do-unt mean nowt but what's right," declared Philip. "Avore I'd let th' little-un come to harm I'd—I'd throttle un, zhure as I be alive."

Saunders argued the matter with him, telling him that so far as he was concerned, if he had a daughter, he would just as soon, or sooner, see her a rich man's mistress than a poor man's wife. He grew quite heated in denouncing Philip's folly.

Grove grew equally heated in the debate, and when Saunders taunted him with the impossibility of doing anything if a daughter should elect to occupy such a position, he was tempted to tell the story of the firing of the ricks at Graysbourne as an example of the way an injured man might attain his revenge.

Once again Saunders' ears were eager for detail and he was not content until he had been told the fullest particulars. Afterwards the talk, growing gradually more incoherent as the whisky bottle was emptied, ranged upon a variety of topics but Saunders forgot nothing.

He remembered the details just as distinctly the next day. In fact, he could not get the story out of his mind, and when he had pondered upon it for a week he came to the conclusion that it ought certainly to be told to Grove's employer.

The conclusion was synchronous with the information

which Philip gave him that Ryeland had returned to the office at the wharf and thus it happened that, one afternoon when Philip was comfortably settled in the bar at the Friar's Head, Ned Saunders presented himself at Peter's Wharf and asked to see the principal, and after kicking his heels for ten minutes in an ante-room he was ushered into Ryeland's presence.

Ryeland looked the man sharply up and down as he entered and wondered what the unpleasant-looking person could want with him.

"You asked to see me privately, I believe," he said, "but surely the matter is one which you can explain just as well to one of my clerks. I am a busy man."

"Begging your parding, sir," remarked Saunders aspiring vigorously, "but there has come into my per-session certain hinfermation which I can honly part with, so ter s'y, into yer hown private hear," and he added parenthetically, "which I suppose I ham speakin' to Mr. Ryeland, Hesquire, hof the firm hof Messrs. Medwin an' Co."

"I am Mr. Ryeland," replied Nicholas with a smile. "But at the same time I cannot conceive that you can give me any information which can possibly be of interest to me."

Saunders grinned. His blue lips in parting, revealing only the stumps of discoloured teeth, made his appearance more unpleasant than ever. "It's on the cards as yer will halter yer opinion when yer hears what I've got ter s'y," he remarked with an air of self-satisfaction.

"Well out with it," said Ryeland, "I have no time to spare beating about the bush."

"Hif the hinfermation is of any use," replied Saunders deliberately, "I 'opes, so ter s'y, as yer will bear the hinformant in mind in case of heventualities, meanin' that is, as 'ow it's agoin' against the grain fer ter split as one might s'y on a pal, though bein' no more than my duty to put Messrs. Medwin an' Co. on their guard."

Ryeland could scarce forbear laughing at this mysterious speech. But he curbed the inclination and remarked, "Well, if you can tell me anything likely to be of service you will not find me illiberal, but I think that if I give you half a crown and you keep your mouth shut we shall neither of us be much worse off". He thought that the man had got some information about some trifling dereliction of duty on the part of one of his employees and was anxious to make money of it.

Saunders came close to the table. "It's rounding on a mite, sir, and not a blessed word will I s'y honless yer promise, has a genleman, that you'll never breathe a word has to where the hinferration comes from."

"All right, I'll promise that anyway," replied Nicholas, for he had become amused at the man's air of mystery.

"The hindividual abart whom I can s'y something," remarked Saunders speaking in a loud whisper, "is your housekeeper, which 'is nime is Philip Grove." As he uttered the name he stepped back a pace to watch the effect of the communication upon Nicholas. He was disappointed at the result. Ryeland threw himself back in his chair and laughed aloud. Laughed so heartily that Saunders, who had expected an eager demand for his information, could not conceal his chagrin. He concluded immediately that either Ryeland knew all about the rick-firing affair or that Grove's story about the offer made to him was a fabrication. He turned to depart.

Nicholas, divining his thoughts, stopped him. Perhaps Grove had said something or other when drunk which it would be advisable for him to know.

"Now look here, Mr.—you said Saunders, I believe?"

"Ned Saunders, sir," replied the man.

"Well, Saunders, you must excuse my laughing but really you cannot think that anything concerning my housekeeper can be of any importance to me. I laughed because I know he has a devil of a temper and bound

to make enemies. This is not the first time people have been here to complain about him."

"It's nothin' o' that, sir," replied the man. "What I 'as to s'y, sir, is what 'e told me hisself. Not that I believes all he says, an' when 'e told me that you, sir, was fer carryin' on with that slip of a gel of 'is, I as good as called 'im a liar, I did strite."

Nicholas started at the speech, and at once made an effort to retrieve the effect that his momentary loss of control produced upon Saunders.

"People always say that sort of thing about we city men," he remarked, "though it is not the sort of thing one expects to hear from their own servants. I must thank you for having brought the matter to my notice."

Saunders smirked. "That's nothin', sir," he continued. "Er course I knowed 'e was a-lying abart that. But the other matter 'e telled me abart, I don't think 'e was lyin'; it means penal servitude fer 'im if it were known." He paused and looked at Ryeland.

Nicholas turned and unlocked the safe standing behind his chair and Saunders' eyes flashed greedily as he heard the jingle of money. Ryeland counted out five sovereigns and laid them in a little pile on his desk.

"These are yours," he said, "if you have really in your possession any serious information respecting Grove."

Saunders leaned over the table. "Yer can judge fer yerself, sir," he said. "I'll tell yer exactly what 'e told me, though whether it's all gospel truth or not, it's not fer me ter s'y." Then he repeated the story as he had had it from Philip of the firing of the rectory ricks.

Nicholas listened intently, summing up the probabilities of the tale being true as the man unfolded the details. Philip was not in the least likely to have invented such a yarn, and it suddenly dawned upon Ryeland that here was given to him a means of getting a hold upon the man and through him upon his daughter which neither

of them would be able to throw off. He found some difficulty in concealing his exultation, nevertheless, he said quietly when Saunders finished his narrative, "It is a remarkable story, Saunders, and whether true or not I think I am justified in giving you the reward I promised. When a man allows his mind to run on such subjects and at the same time is drinking more than is good for him he is scarcely the sort of person to be left in charge of premises like these."

"That's just what I said to myself, sir," replied Saunders eagerly. "It's my duty to put Medwin an' Co. on their guard, I says. An' so doin' I was not lookin' fer any payment though if I might put in a word fer myself when the berth is vacant, sir——"

Nicholas took the five sovereigns from the table. "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, Saunders. Take this now and of course I shall not forget your zeal in my interests if—if the occasion should arise. At the same time I need hardly warn you not to speak of this conversation to anyone."

"Thank you, sir," said Saunders as he withdrew congratulating himself on the happy outcome of his treachery. He felt quite virtuous as he stepped outside the gate though he was not easy in his mind until he found that Grove was still seated in the bar at the Friar's.

Meanwhile Nicholas Ryeland turned again to his work for there were heavy arrears to be made up, and not until the last of the clerks had departed did he give himself up to the thoughts which the story had evoked. When he did give the matter consideration he concluded that the chance had come at last to him. He felt no doubts as to the substantial truth of the story he had heard. Well, Grove was in his power, and Lossie?—she should have the opportunity of choosing between his embraces and luxury, or Dalton for herself and prison for her father.

Presently he heard Grove's heavy step in the outer office and smiled. "There will be no chance of anybody overhearing our conversation," he muttered.

A moment later the door of his office was thrown open. Grove entered and catching sight of his employer would have withdrawn with a confused apology had not Ryeland's voice arrested him.

"Come in, Grove. I've stayed behind expressly to speak to you."

Grove made no reply. He had done his best to avoid encountering his employer since his return, for there rankled in his mind the comments made by Saunders as to the real object which Nicholas had in view, and seeing nothing before him but the rejection of the proposals he wished to avert the evil day for so long as he could.

Ryeland seemed at some loss as to how to open the conversation for though unburdened with many scruples yet he did not find it an easy task to bargain with a father for his daughter's honour. At last he plunged into the subject confusedly.

"I have been thinking that—that the sooner we came to some arrangement—that the sooner you and Lossie are out of this house and settled in the cottage I spoke about the better."

Grove muttered something to himself which sounded like an assent and Nicholas gathered courage. "Have you spoken to Lossie about the matter?"

"Noa," replied Philip sullenly.

"I will speak to her myself," replied Ryeland. "I think I can find an argument which will persuade her," and he laughed.

Philip was in one of his vilest tempers and he stood bracing his muscles with hands tightly clenched behind his back as he replied, "May-be youm g'wain' too vast. May-be youm reckonin' th' bushels avore th' ingatherin' let alone th' thrashin'."

“What do you mean?” Ryeland queried in the imperative tone.

“I be meanin’,” said Philip duly resentful of the tone, “that may-be I veels inclined to let th’ lass choose vor hersen.”

“Indeed,” replied Nicholas with a sneer. “Have you forgotten that I may have something to say on that point.”

Philip exploded with sudden anger. “What be it to do wi’ thee?” he inquired. “Th’ lass be mine an’ zartain I be-unt g’wain’ to zee her bought an’ zold like a beast ov th’ vield.” He stopped suddenly, silenced by the glance Ryeland darted at him.

“You dare speak to me so? You——” began Nicholas. Then he paused, the ready prudence of the man intent upon gaining his own ends telling him that it might be unwise to goad Grove too far. He rose from his chair and paced the room once, twice, thrice, Philip eyeing him defiantly the while. He stayed his footsteps when beside the man and whispered in his ear, “What about Mr. Bygrave’s ricks at Graysbourne?”

Grove staggered back dumbfounded. Every line in his face betokened fear. “Wha—what dost thee mean?” he stammered.

Ryeland noted the effect he had produced and pursued his advantage remorselessly. “You know very well what I mean, Grove,” he said significantly. “And before you go the length of defying me I thought I would just make you aware that I have information in my possession which will send you to gaol.”

“It—it be-unt true as I zet vire to they ricks,” muttered Philip half-heartedly.

Ryeland laughed at him. “Do you want the particulars recalled to your memory?” he said tauntingly. “Shall I tell you of your long walk after you left Lossie on the boat? Do you want to know how you looked as you crept between the wall and the rick and struck

the first match? You surely cannot have forgotten your hiding in the hedge as the messenger went past for the fire engine, nor how heartily you laughed as you watched the fire engine start knowing that it could not arrive in time to be of material service?"

Philip made no further attempt at denial. Great beads of sweat stood out on his brow. "I'm thinkin' youm be th' devil," he said.

"You will find I'm not very different to deal with if you run counter to my wishes," replied Nicholas.

"They can't touch I vor it," ventured Grove timidly after a pause. "Another chap wor vound guilty."

Ryeland, presuming on Grove's ignorance, replied in the same taunting tone: "You need not reckon on that, Grove. You do not seem to have heard that the innocence of the poor fellow who was convicted for your crime was conclusively proved and he was let out a long time since. I have but to say a word and you would be in the hands of the police."

Philip's last hope had gone. His hands relaxed and he was compelled to steady himself against the mantel. "What be g'wain' to do?" The words dropped hoarsely from his dry lips.

"Sit down," commanded Ryeland and Philip obeyed meekly.

Again Nicholas paced the office and when he at last spoke it was in a tone of comparative friendliness.

"For Lossie's sake," he said, "I am going to save you from the punishment due to your crime, Grove. No one at present except myself knows all the real facts of the case and I am willing to keep your secret on one condition. It is for you to choose, to choose now, whether you will be on my side or against me. I am going to speak plainly. I want your daughter and if I get my wish it means that freedom and luxury are yours for the rest of your life; if you go against me well—it is prison! prison! prison!"

At each reiteration of the word Philip winced, and Ryeland, watching him keenly, perceived that he would win. He saw in his victim's face the last struggle of manhood against an overwhelming floodtide of fear. Manhood in its last despairing gasp cried out: "Zend I to gaol an' let th' little-un plaze hersel," and went under with a sob.

"I don't want Lossie to do anything against her wish," continued Nicholas. "She shall do exactly as she pleases, knowing all that is likely to happen if she refuses my offer. It surely isn't much to ask you to stand by me when I tell her that it is in my power to send you to imprisonment and tell her how she may save you. You would get ten years for that piece of work, you know, Grove."

"Vor God's sake stop, Measter." The labourer had succumbed. His face, grey and drawn, was lifted from his hands. The dread of the unknown, an unreasoning horror of the prison had swept away every other thought.

"When be g'wain' to tell her?"

Nicholas thought awhile. "To-night is Thursday. I shall be staying in town on Saturday night, I will mention it then. Meanwhile say nothing to her."

"Noa, zur." The man was quite cowed and his hands quivered as hands stricken with the palsy.

Ryeland went to the cupboard and returned with half a tumbler of whisky. "Here, Grove," he remarked, "get that inside you. Remember that you have always a friend in me so long as you stick to your part of the bargain."

"Thankee kindly, Measter Nicholas," replied Philip as he clutched eagerly at the glass.

Ryeland donned coat and hat and bade him good night, adding as an afterthought, "You may as well tell Lossie I shall be staying here on Saturday, and tell her to come to me in the morning for orders".

Grove made no reply, and when he was left alone he

let his head fall again into his hands. The blow had been the more severe by reason of its total unexpectedness. The shadow of the prison was over him. He was in Ryeland's power, and there was no means of escape save one open to him. He cursed the day which had brought him to Peter's Wharf. He had been content with the life of a bargeman. It was only at Lossie's desire that he had left it. She was responsible for the predicament in which he found himself, why, then, should he hesitate at making use of her to deliver him? If her professions of love for him were true, she surely would not hesitate to save him from gaol. If she refused, well—she should save him despite herself.

He might have sat where Ryeland had left him for an hour or more, but he was so deeply buried in thought that he did not hear the door open nor a soft footfall on the carpeted floor.

"Father, what are you doing here? Are you ill?"

He leaped up, half dazed still, and stared at Lossie stupidly.

"Noa," he said, "I must ha' vallen asleep."

His appearance gave credibility to the lie.

"Poor old father," said Lossie. "You go upstairs and I will lock up for you."

"Zeems to me I've zomethin' to tell ee," remarked Philip, "though th' drowsiness 'as put it outen my yud. Aw! I be rememberin'. Th' measter telled I as un 'ull be stayin' on Zaturday night an' thee bist to zee un in marnin' ver orders."

"What a nuisance," said the girl. Dalton had promised to take her to the theatre on the Saturday, and now she feared she would have to put off the pleasure. Although the day was fast approaching when she would be able to devote the whole of her time to him, yet she grudged every moment that was not passed in his company.

CHAPTER XXX

THROUGHOUT the Friday and the Saturday Philip Grove kept his conscience at bay by continuous indulgence in whisky. On the Saturday morning Lossie remonstrated with him. He answered her with a curse. She pleaded with him, even to tears, but without effect. He told her that nothing mattered since some one else was going to provide for her. At the thought her heart thrilled and she could make no answer. In a few days, in a very few days now, Frank would be her safeguard and shelter from trouble and sorrow. She fell to counting the hours as she flew about the old house, polishing the furniture and making things ready against the arrival of her employer's expected guests. In another week she would be polishing the tables and chairs in her own little home, making it bright for her husband. She called him so to her heart always. Sometimes she whispered the name shyly in his ear when her arms twined about his neck and her head lay on his shoulder in their farewell kiss. Within a week she would have the right to use it boldly and not blush when it fell from her lips. The thought even dispelled the cloud on her brow called up by her father's folly.

She seemed to Nicholas Ryeland, when she brought a cup of tea to him in his room during the afternoon, more beautiful than she had ever been. His nature was more sensual than passionate, but a wave of genuine passion swept over him at sight of her, and before she was aware of his intention his arm was round her waist and he had tasted the ripeness of her lips. She made an angry remonstrance, but he only laughed and, realis-

ing that in six more days she would be beyond his power, she determined to bear his insolence for her father's sake. He kept her in attendance upon him while he drank his tea, giving her final instructions for the supper he had bidden her prepare, and he was so simply her employer that, when she left him, Lossie felt that she might after all have been unnecessarily alarmed at his unwelcome attentions.

It was characteristic of Ryeland that even after this interview, during which he had gloated over Lossie's beauties with the satisfaction of a Sultan over a new purchase for his harem, he should have returned to his office and buried himself in his books. He had been similarly engaged on his wedding eve, he remembered. Then he had been casting figures until midnight without feeling his attention in any way distracted by anticipation. "It is not so to-night," he muttered, when for the second time in an hour his pen dropped from his fingers and he found himself dropping into reverie. He conceded that he was engaged in a riskier adventure than marriage, and finding himself becoming nervous he left the office and went for a brisk walk on the Embankment. He dined early at a restaurant in the Strand, and afterwards dropped into a music hall for an hour. Eleven o'clock was just booming from St. Paul's when he returned to the wharf.

Lossie answered his summons, and appeared surprised at seeing him alone.

"Ask your father to come down, Lossie, I want to speak to him," he said. "You come too, for I shall want you."

She wondered what had happened, but she did as he had bidden her. When she returned with her father Ryeland said at once, "My friends have disappointed me, Grove, so rather than waste the supper Lossie has prepared I thought you and Lossie would not mind joining me".

The girl began to make excuses, but they were only half-hearted, for she anticipated no harm while her father was present, and Philip soon cut them short with, "I be-unt vule enow to say noa to a good zupper. I thank ee kindly, zur."

"Sit down, Lossie," cried Nicholas gaily. "I may never have another chance of asking you to sup with me. I expect when you are married you will be far too proud to sit down to the table with an humble individual like myself."

Philip gave a hoarse guffaw. He had been drinking steadily all day and Lossie was fearful lest he should betray his condition.

"Th' little-un 'ull be a vine lady one o' these days ver zhure," he said, and Lossie wondered that Ryeland did not resent the familiarity of her father's tone, but he paid no heed and placed her in a seat beside himself, while her father sat opposite.

For a while Lossie could find nothing to take exception to, and she felt quite gay. The room looked very comfortable with the bright firelight and the soft illumination of a shaded lamp glowing on the dark pannelling, the snowy cloth and the gleaming silver. Philip was the only inharmonious part of the picture. For the first time Lossie realised that he would be out of place in the new home she was about to enter, that the time might come when she would be ashamed of him. In his own sphere, in the cottage, or on the barge, he had appeared admirable; at the supper table he was an undeniable illustration of matter in the wrong place, for he sat awkwardly and his movements were clumsy and uncouth. Ryeland did not seem to notice his want of ease, and Lossie felt almost grateful to him for his tact. He had insisted upon her discarding her apron, and when that badge of servitude was removed she almost unconsciously dropped the respectful form of address which she had studiously used hitherto in

addressing her employer. He had chosen to treat her as an equal in social station, she determined to exact from him her due meed of respect. Ryeland thought his plan was progressing swimmingly, and exerted himself to amuse her so successfully that the suspicion which had haunted her was dissipated.

The suspicion returned again when she was pressed to take a second glass from the bottle of champagne Nicholas had opened, and when she steadfastly refused she observed that he was plying her father with the liquor. Philip was undoubtedly enjoying the novel experience, and as the wine mounted to his head he began to be loquacious. With the sweets Ryeland opened a second bottle. Lossie tried to catch her father's eye, but he ignored her unspoken request to drink no more. Thereupon she ventured a low aside to Ryeland.

"Don't give father so much, Mr. Nicholas. It gets into his head."

Ryeland laughed and repeated her request aloud.

"Haw! haw! haw!" chimed in Philip uproariously. "She be main particlar, be th' little-un."

"I think we ought to toast her in a tumbler," said Nicholas. "These glasses are all too small. What do you say, Grove?"

"It be main good stuff to zet th' mind at ease," replied the labourer. "But one do-unt be gettin' much vorrader."

Nicholas filled him a tumbler and replenished his own and Lossie's glass despite her protest.

"I be-unt a vule," declared Philip. "It's a vine thing to be gentlevolk vor once an' drink champagne."

"Father!" said Lossie. There was reproach in her tone.

"Don't be hard on him, Lossie," said Ryeland. "Come, I'll give you a toast. What do you say to 'our dearest wish'? Empty your glass to that and tell me what it is afterwards, and if it is anything I

can manage to do for you I'll pledge my word your wish shall come true."

In a sudden spirit of daring she determined to accept the challenge. She lifted her glass and the two men followed her example. When she set it down it was empty.

"Yours ought to be a very earnest wish, Lossie, for you to pledge it so deeply," remarked Ryeland.

"I shall hold you to your promise, sir," said Lossie. The wine had brought a flush to her cheek and a sparkle to her eyes. Never had Nicholas seen her look so beautiful.

"Sir, Lossie?" he inquired.

"I shall hold you to your promise, sir," she repeated steadily.

"Well, what is it?" he asked. "Do you want a cottage of your own or only a new dress?"

"It is neither," she said quietly. "I only want your promise that when I am married to Fr——, to Frank, you will still find employment for my father."

Ryeland laughed aloud and Philip joined tipsily in the cachinnation. The mention of his rival's name, the catch in the girl's voice as she mentioned it, set him aflame with the conviction that now or never was the time to put at end to their acquaintance.

"When you are married to Frank," he repeated. "Ha! ha! ha!"

"Haw! haw! haw!" echoed Grove.

Ryeland turned to Philip.

"You see how thoughtful Lossie is for your future, Grove. She doesn't want you when she is married. There won't be many champagne suppers for you then. You ought to be very grateful to her for asking me to provide for you."

"No, no, no," the girl almost wailed. "I didn't mean—I—— You are not fair."

Grove's face was dark with anger. "Thee be-unt a

g'wain to marry th' Dalton chap," he declared. "'Tis I, thee veyther, zezzo." He brought his fist down on the table by way of emphasis, and a couple of glasses shivered at the concussion.

"Have another glass and forget it," said Ryeland. "She is only a girl, and if she is as sensible as I imagine her to be, we shall soon persuade her that she can do better for herself than that." He opened a fourth bottle as he spoke, but his hand shook, and the froth was scattered over the carpet.

Meanwhile Lossie moved towards the door. A great fear had overtaken her. It was clear now that her father was in league with his employer to put some obstacle in the way of her marriage with Dalton. She knew she was alone in the great house with the two men, and she knew, too, that her father had been drinking heavily all day. His manner reminded her of the time when he had beaten her. It was time to fly.

Ryeland realised her intention and dropping the bottle barred her escape, saying as he did so, "No, you don't, Lossie, we cannot spare you just yet."

She tried to force down his arm, but he lifted her from her feet and placed her in an easy chair by the fire, deaf to her piteous cry "Let me go".

She appealed to Philip. "Father! You have said that you would never let any one lay a finger on your little-one but yourself. Won't you help me, your Lossie."

"Do-unt ee be a vule," replied Grove. "Measter be-unt a g'wain to hurt ee. Measter be 'avein' zummat to zay to ee."

The resentment which had showed itself when Ryeland had made so effective a use of her request still showed in Grove's voice. He helped himself to a tumbler of the champagne and ceased to take any more notice of her.

Nicholas took up the conversation. "Grove is right,

Lossie," he said. "I have something important to say to you. I want you to realise that it is in your power to do more for yourself and more for your father than you are aware. I have spoken to Grove about the offer I have made you, to provide a home for you both in the country, and he is quite agreeable. I want you to think again before you finally refuse." He bent over the chair and strove to take her hand. She wrenched it away from him, every nerve in her body quivering defiance.

Ryeland only laughed. "Now don't be angry, Lossie," he continued. "Or I shall have to take some unpleasant steps to tame that wild little heart, my dear."

"I'd die first," she said, with clenched teeth.

He laughed again but his eyes grew more eager and he drew nearer to her.

"These heroics are quite wasted on me," he said. "Now listen quietly while I tell you what the result of your marrying Dalton would be. The first—the very first—would be that to-morrow morning I shall hand over your father to the police on a charge of arson—for setting fire to the rickyard of the late rector of Grays-bourne."

"You—you cannot," she gasped. All the colour had gone out of her face, and she shivered.

"Ask him." Ryeland nodded at Grove who ejaculated with drunken gravity, "Itsh true, Loshie, thrush Goshpel".

"Do you think Dalton is going to marry a convict's daughter?" continued Ryeland.

The girl made no reply. Hope was dying out in her heart. Only two hours before the cup of happiness seemed within her reach, and now it was snatched away; in another hour it might be shattered for ever.

"Go to him otherwise and how long do you think he will be true to you? I am speaking to you as a man of

the world, Lossie, one who has known hundreds of such cases. He will tire of your pretty face, and where will you be then with your father in gaol? If you come to me your father will never be parted from you."

The girl's confidence in her lover rose up in revolt against the aspersion upon him. "You judge of him by yourself," she retorted. "My Frank could not be untrue."

"No?" he asked. "He was true to my sister Ruth, wasn't he? I suppose he has told you some cock-and-bull story about that, eh?"

The shaft struck home. Her strength seemed to fail her and she clutched at her throat. Ryeland saw how near she was to fainting and held a glass of the wine to her lips. Her mouth was parched. She sipped a little and revived somewhat, though she still could do nothing but lie back nervelessly and try to think of some means of escape.

Ryeland surrounded her waist with his arm and continued in a softer tone than he had hitherto used. "Be sensible, Lossie. If you can but learn to love me a little, everything will be so different. Neither you nor your father will have anything to fear."

He had become almost oblivious of Philip's presence until the man interrupted drunkenly, "Aye, Loshie. Be—— shenshible, lash, 'n lishen—to—measter".

Nicholas looked at him and his lip curled. "Take another bottle to bed with you, Grove," he said. "I'll look after Lossie."

The man staggered to his feet. "Thash aw ri'. Givesh th' bottle," he said.

"No! Stay! stay! Oh, my God!" Lossie had sprung clear of Ryeland's embrace and rushed to her father's side. "Save me from him," she cried wildly. "Only save me from him and I will give Frank up, I will never see him more, though I love him so—I love him so." Her voice was broken with sobs. "Father,

I have cared for you all the days of my life. Let us go away, we two together. I will promise never to leave you, only save me from him."

"Wha's mazzer now?" said Grove stupidly as he threw off the hand she had laid on his shoulder.

But she caught his hand in hers and her tears trickled down upon it. "No, no, no. Don't be so cruel. You are man enough not to fear his threats."

"Lemme go, I wansh go bed," was his only reply and as she still clung to him he twisted his arm free and struck her with his open palm. Reeling from the blow she staggered across the room, moaning a little softly, and pulled back the curtain from the window which overlooked the river. The moonlight entered in a silver stream and rested upon her as with trembling fingers she endeavoured to unfasten the clasp.

An arm dragged her back and a mocking voice whispered in her ear. "Don't be foolish, Lossie. You were made for love, my darling, not for the river."

Once again she struggled free and faced her adversary. There was yet one expedient left to her. She stood still and said as calmly as she could, "Let me go. I am Frank Dalton's wife."

Nicholas was taken aback by the announcement. This he had not forseen and he turned fiercely on Grove. "So you have lied to me, d——n you. Well to-morrow you shall know what the inside of a prison looks like."

Philip swayed to and fro stupidly with his eyes fixed on his daughter. "Thee bist tha' chap's wife?" he asked. "Haw! haw! Whur be wedd'n ring, young-un?"

Lossie shuddered. She saw the light flash up in Ryeland's eyes once more and knew that her last hope was nearly gone.

"I am as much Frank Dalton's wife as if I had been to church with him," she said piteously.

"Wha's that—be—shayin'?" demanded Philip his face growing angry. "Whursh thee lines or be ee tha' danged chapsh light-o-love?"

In spite of the control she had enforced upon herself the girl winced. "No," she said, "that is what you are trying to make of me."

Philip raised his hand to strike her but Ryeland intervened. "Bah!" he said, "the girl's no worse than most of them. She'll be the more reasonable."

But Philip's wrath had grown. "An' I did think her wor ash straight a maid ash ever stepped into zhift on wedd'n ni'," he said. "Zeems I be wrong. Danged if I ash owt more to do wi' ee." He shook his fist at her threateningly and turned to Ryeland. "Lesh 'ave 'nother drink. She can go t' 'ell vor what I caresh, she be no bettern a hure. If she be-unt shenshble call I, an' I 'ull take a strap to th' slut. 'Twon't be virsht time."

He caught the girl by the arm and swung her across the room, and taking the bottle Ryeland held out to him he staggered from the room.

Lossie lay where she had fallen. Her spirit was broken at last. She was too weak to resist further. She felt an arm round her and hot kisses on her lips. She felt herself borne into the adjoining room.

One scream broke from her lips, the first she had uttered, and the last. It reached Philip's ears where he lay in his room on the floor above but he did not stir. As it died away the big bell of St. Paul's boomed out one.

CHAPTER XXXI

RYELAND slept. Lossie raised her head and listened. The power to think coherently had deserted her, but she knew that she wanted to creep away and be alone. She had waited so long for him to sleep that she might no longer hear the sound of his hateful voice nor feel the touch of his lips and hand. In his sleep he still held her close to him, and the dim glow of the shaded light just revealed the triumphant curl of his lip. Lossie wondered that he dared sleep after the evil he had wrought upon her. She would never be able to sleep more. She ventured to slip from his embrace and shuddered as he moved. But he still slept on. Softly she gathered her garments together.

“Ah, God!” She nearly screamed as she caught sight of the crumpled bundle of her love letters. Until then they had always rested on her heart. She gathered them together and softly opening the door she glided into the next room. Her trembling fingers delayed her terribly, but she persevered until she had donned her clothing. She went on to the staircase. Nothing else stirred in the house. She mounted cautiously to the next floor and took the keys from their place behind the door. Mechanically too she took a hat and cloak from the pegs where they hung. Softly again, down the stair past the door where he slept. She gained the door. The lock yielded almost noiselessly to the key. On the doorstep she pulled on her boots but it was too dark to lace them.

Before crossing the yard she paused irresolutely, looking toward the archway which led to the river. But

she turned away, her lips framing the reply to her half thought. "Not yet, I must say good-bye to Frank."

The outer gate was more difficult to manage in the darkness but at last it swung open and, dropping the keys inside, she closed it behind her and stepped into the street. She was free. Free? The thought was mockery. Freedom had come too late. Her strength failed her and she sank down on the pavement. The sound of a measured footstep in the distance roused her again. Soon her flight would be discovered and she must get far away and hide. She would like to see Frank again first. Unconsciously her feet carried her into Holborn. At the gate of Barnard's Inn she paused. Alas, it was closed. She would have liked to look up just once at his windows. There would be no light burning for he had promised her that he would not work late of nights, unless it were that again it had happened, as once before, that he was sitting and dreaming—of the time when she, his own true little wife, would be there with him—until the morning crept in at the windows. "His own true little wife." The memory of the words brought keener anguish to her suffering heart. He should never know. She had told him that she would die before she would be unfaithful, and Ryeland had held her in his arms and she still lived. She bent to the ground and kissed the cold stone. The sole of his foot would rest there in the morning. As she knelt she heard the watchman—whose voice kept alive the memory of bygone days—call out, "Five o'clock and a frosty morning".

God! What an eternity the last four hours had held. But it was five o'clock and she must be moving. Moving, but whither? She kissed the stone again and rising went slowly westward. If Dalton had met her he would not have recognised her, for she walked with the feeble steps and bowed form of an old woman.

So onward until the park was reached and then she

drooped. Her strength was spent. If she might only sleep, but no, she was wide awake and her eyeballs burned. She curled herself in the corner of a doorway and rested, drawing her cloak closely round her. Now she had time to try to think, but somehow the dull ache in her temples and at her heart prevented her. She moaned aloud, longing to weep but finding no tears. She could only rock herself to and fro and repeat the name "Frank, Frank," to herself.

The dawn came up rosily, and the few passers-by glanced at her curiously. The policeman on the beat, who had hitherto left her in peace, warned her to find another resting-place. Again she thought of the river, but it was daylight now and some one might prevent her. She moved on hurriedly again. She must get further away. She looked behind her once or twice fancying that Ryeland might be in pursuit. If she could only find some place where she might rest in safety. There was only one place. If she were only at home, at Graysbourne. She wondered she had not thought of that before. She had been happy there as a girl, she could rest there. She could tell Miss Ruth, who had been so kind to her, that she was tired, and she would let her rest somewhere. But Graysbourne was so far away. But—she had come to the entrance to Paddington Station. Surely Frank had told her something about this place. Of a sudden she remembered. That was the way home; how stupid of her not to have remembered at once. Automatically her hand sought her cloak pocket. Her purse was still there; she had forgotten to remove it when she had returned from marketing the previous day.

"I wonder if there's enough," she said doubtfully. She had a half-sovereign, a shilling or two and a few coppers. She made her way to the booking office and asked for a ticket to Graysbourne. Her voice was so clear and unchanged that she was astonished at the

sound of it. The man at the office told her that there was no station named Graysbourne on the line.

"I want the nearest station to it," said Lossie.

The man shook his head. "What county, miss?" he asked.

"Gloucestershire," she answered.

"Would you know the name if I mentioned it?" he continued.

Lossie thought she would, and the man rattled off a string of names. One of them seemed familiar. Stroud? Yes, that must be the place where she and her father had gone from Graysbourne when they were thrust out of the village. "I'll take a ticket to Stroud," she said.

The man looked at her curiously through the aperture but stamped the ticket and gave Lossie the change from the half-sovereign she laid down without remark. "You haven't much time to lose," he remarked glancing at the clock.

Lossie hurried on to the platform, and the guard of a waiting train noticing her perturbation asked her destination. "Stroud," she gasped. He opened a door and thrust her in, and before she realised it the train was in motion.

The movement seemed to arouse her dormant faculties. She knew she was safe now, safe from the pursuit of her enemy, safe from the pursuit of the man she loved. In a flood came the tide of recollection. But still no tears. She was all alone in the compartment, and she could moan aloud and so strive for release from the pain, but she could not weep.

The train was a slow one. It crawled into tiny stations and out of them again. Lossie caught glimpses of the river and memories of the happy days spent thereon redoubled her sorrow. They were gone never to return. Never. She could never see Frank again, she could not face him, she was soiled, though not of

her own will. In her own eyes she had become outcast from love even as two years since she had been outcast from the village. Yes, she was going back to the village. Why? She did not know. The thought which had dictated her determination was already forgotten. Instead another idea came to comfort her a little. She remembered suddenly that once Ruth Ryeland had said to her, "If ever you are in trouble come to me, Lossie". Here there was at least the glimmerings of comfort to be found, and almost insensibly it lulled her to sleep. Hers was not a perfect rest, but nevertheless she gained from it some slight respite from the devouring ache at her heart. She awoke when the train dashed into a tunnel, and when the open country was again entered she began to recognise familiar features. The canal at one point lay at the bottom of the embankment. At the next stoppage the girl alighted. The afternoon was dull and a few snowflakes began to fall as the girl passed through the barrier.

Lossie thought she knew her way and she set out forthwith heedless of the faintness which threatened to overcome her. It was not a pleasant path at the best of times. When on bright summer days she had traversed the towing path she had felt the depression, and now it fitted her mood. The black cinder path was of a piece with the dirty water in the canal. She passed by decrepit cloth mills, each with a black pool of water covered with a foul slime. The water still called her, but she resisted the temptation.

No, she could not fly from life yet. She walked on swiftly, rebellious at the thought. Soon she was past the houses and only the hills rose up on either hand. She drew her cloak more closely around her and hurried on, for the sun had gone down, a keen wind was blowing, and it was very cold. The night grew darker, and again one or two snowflakes swept past on the breeze. Lossie remembered the time when the blossom of the wild

cherry had so drifted by and she had called out to her father to come and see the snow in spring. That was when she had a father.

The night grew darker still. She could scarcely distinguish the path and her footsteps grew slower. Death must not grip her unawares before that last message to Frank was sent. The way was very long, her feet very weary. Then she caught a glimpse of a light ahead, and she passed by a barge moored for the night. A couple of donkeys moved uneasily as she flitted by. The sight raised struck another chord in her memory. It reminded her of the night when her father had beaten her. She shuddered and felt again the smart of the rope on her shoulders. So she came at last to the spot where the tow path ended and the canal entered the tunnel. Her way now was up the hillside towards the lights which glimmered near the top of the slope. Death nearly overtook her as she climbed wearily upwards. Once she fell and longed to lie awhile and rest, but she rose again and came at last to a cottage where a ruddy glow filtered through a red blind and latticed window. The light looked so inviting that Lossie stayed her progress. Perhaps the inhabitants would allow her to rest awhile.

To her hesitating knock a cheery voice shouted, "Come in".

She was too exhausted to accept the invitation and she could only cling to the door-post. The door was thrown open and the light from the lamp within streamed out upon her until a broad figure came between. Lossie thought the door had been shut again until she felt herself picked up, and a moment later she was set down again in a strait-backed chair before the fire blazing on the hearth.

"Zhure, it be a young ooman," said the man who had picked her up as he peered under her hat. "Zeems her 'ave been took vainty," he continued, as he noted the

pallor of the girl's face. "Yeer wife, likely you can do more vor she than I."

His wife brushed him aside unceremoniously and bade a younger couple who had arisen from their seats and stood gazing at the girl "not to stand hummoxing about in everybody's way," as she went to the girl's side.

"You ben't vrom yer-about's?" she questioned kindly as she caught up the girl's cold hand and began to chafe it vigorously.

Lossie shook her head feebly.

"I did think I'd never zeed ee avore," replied the woman as she took off the girl's hat and arranged her comfortably.

As the warmth of the fire stole into the girl's chilled frame she recovered her power of speech, though her voice was very feeble. "I am on my way to Graysbourne," she explained, "but—I was so tired—I thought maybe—you might let me rest—awhile."

"For sure we will," replied the woman heartily, "but it's a long walk vor ee, is Graysbourne, at this time o' night an' th' snow a-vallin an' all. Zhure ee be nigh starved wi' th' cold already." She turned to her daughter. "Yeer, Zuzan, make th' lass a cup o' tea. 'Twouldn't be Christian to let the likes ov her ouden th' cold wi'out." She turned again to Lossie. "Maybe it's thee veyther or thee mother youm vor zeein'?"

Lossie shook her head again. "I have no mother—no father."

"Poor lass." The man drew his hand across his eyes and Susan gave an audible sniff.

"I—I am going to see a friend at Graysbourne," continued Lossie.

"Aw! zhure," replied the elder of the men. "Ha' thee comed var now?"

"I came—from London," answered Lossie wearily as she lay back in the chair and closed her eyes.

"All alone, maybe?"

“Let the lass alone wi’ thee cross questions,” interrupted the elder woman. “Do-unt ee zee as she’s trouble on her mind.” She bustled round and made the tea, and when it was sweetened she held the cup to Lossie’s lips and said, “Thur, my brave heart, drink it up an’ when youm be so inclined I’ll put ee to bed, for not a step vurther ’ull thy little vit carry ee this blessed night.”

As she said the last words she rose and looked round her defiantly as if she hoped for opposition. But she found none. Her husband’s face widened with a smile as he said, “I know’d ee ood come to that in th’ end. I zeed ee thinkin’ that maybe some day one of ourn in zarvice mought be turned out an’——”

“Hush,” she stopped him in the middle of his speech. “I ’ud keep her anyways,” she said. “Look ’tis the veace ov a child an’ th’ zorrowvul lines ov age all awver it.”

She went back to Lossie’s side and was unfeignedly glad to see that the tea had revived her. She brought out bread and cheese and in all kindness pressed her to eat. Lossie thanked her with a wan smile and strove to swallow a mouthful or two, but the sob imprisoned in her throat prevented her. They set her in the warmest corner, took off her shoes and fetched a pillow that she might rest her head, and all the time forbore to ask her another question.

Presently the elder man broke the silence.

“Maybe th’ young ooman won’t mind if we zings a varse or two,” he said to his wife. “Times agone we-uns ha’ vound comvort in ’em.”

“Law, no. You won’t be mindin’?” she asked of Lossie. “It’s th’ way wi’ us o’ Zunday nights after zarvice down at th’ chapel be awver to raise a tune among ourzelves. Maybe you might be strong enow to join in.”

“I could not sing,” Lossie answered, “but please do.

I should not like to feel in the way. You are so kind—I haven't known what home is like for so long—so long."

"Aw! cheer up," said the man. "Maybe youm in trouble, but even zo be as youm in th' deep waters thur's a hand ready an' a-waitin' to zuccour ee." He spoke reverently and gravely. It was a language Lossie had never heard before. She made no answer.

The well-thumbed books were taken from the shelf, more from force of habit than of necessity, for these "chapel-volk" knew their favourites by heart. Then, feebly at first, bashful in the presence of the girl who lay back in the chair looking so frail and white, they commenced to sing a dozen of the old Methodist hymns, concluding with "Sun of my soul, Thou Saviour dear". And when the last strains had died away the younger couple bade their father and mother good-night and with kindly wishes that the stranger would be "vresh as a daisy in the marnin'" departed to their own home. Lossie rose, too, with thanks for their kindness. "I am rested now," she said. "I think I can find my way."

"Hark to th' lass, now," replied the wife. "Never a step will ee stir vrom my doorstep this night. We've a room as we keeps vor the childer when they'm whoam vrom zarvice an' do ee think ov it now. Snug you'll be an' vresh vor th' marnin'."

Lossie objected, but without effect, and not until she was undressed and tucked up in the little bed did the woman leave her.

The rest was grateful to the girl and the warmth comforting, but still she could not sleep. She knew that she would only sleep once more and from that sleep she would not awaken. She lay quite still until day dawned, then she rose and dressed and crept down the crooked little staircase to the kitchen. She felt very weak, she could scarcely stand in spite of her long rest. Perhaps she would never reach Graysbourne after

all and Frank then would never get her last message. It would be better if she could write to him now.

In the kitchen she found only her hostess. Her husband had already gone to his work.

"I wor thinkin' you'd not be stirrin' vor an hour or more, my dear," she said cheerily as Lossie entered, adding as she caught sight of the girl's face, "Eh! but you're not much the better vor th' night's rest."

"I cannot thank you enough," Lossie commenced.

"Do-unt ee zay a word. Do-unt ee now," interrupted the woman. "But just zet ee down an' try an' yut a bit o' zummat. It ent much I can put avore ee but a bit o' vittles an' a zup o' tea 'ull give ee strength to veace thee troubles." She made the girl sit down and bustled about making fresh tea, removing a rasher of very fat bacon from the Dutch oven in front of the fire, cutting a slice of crisp toast into little fingers. "Now 'en," she commanded when the preparations being completed she poured out the tea.

Lossie did her utmost not to appear ungrateful for the hospitality, but it was a hard task to force down even a few mouthfuls of the food. She gave up the attempt at last.

"I can't eat," she said to her hostess. "It seems ungrateful when you are so kind——"

"Never think about that, deary," said the woman. "I'm zorry as you can't. I can understand what it is to be zore stricken wi' trouble. I larned what it was when our virst baby wor took vrom us. The zun didn't zeem to zhine an' thur wor that in my throat as zeemed to stop th' vood vrom g'wain down. Eh! but that wor trouble but we-uns knowed whur to go vor help. We larned to cast our burden on th' Lord an' Ee lightened it zo as we could bear it."

"Yes?" said Lossie wearily. "And you do think there is a God?"

"Zhure I cried out, too, like that in th' blackness ov

our trouble. But Ee knawed I wor but a weak mortal an' I wor forgiven. Do ee listen to an old ooman, deary, an' take thee trouble to th' throne an' you 'ull vind peace a-creepin' into thee 'eart like the scent o' spring in th' oodlands avore ever the winter's ended to knowledge o' man."

It was the earnest voice of the old Methodist, anxious to speak that word in season which is the keystone of their practical religious life, but it awoke no answering chord in Lossie's mind.

Lossie sighed wearily and the elder woman said no more. She had done her duty and henceforth she could only pray that the burden might be lightened upon her guest. "Be thur aught more I can be doin' vor ee?" she inquired presently.

"You have done so much," said Lossie, "that I hardly like to ask, but if you could let me have an envelope and a sheet of note paper I should be very grateful."

"An' welcome," was the prompt answer as the woman brought out her little store of writing materials and spread them on the table. "Set ee down and write whiles I'm washin' up."

The woman left the room and Lossie took up the pen. But she found the task a difficult one. She addressed the envelope to Dalton and the sight of his name seemed to blind her. A wave of passionate regret overwhelmed her and under its influence she hastily covered the sheet with her message and, slipping it into the envelope, sealed it. Her hostess had not returned to the room, and Lossie taking all the money remaining in her purse but a penny, placed it in another envelope which she laid amongst the others on the table. It was all the return she could make for the kindness which she had received.

She did not move again until the woman returned, and then she rose and bade her good-bye. The dame

caught her in her arms and kissed her in sweet motherly fashion. "God bless ee, deary, an' bring ee comvort an' rest," she said, and as Lossie strove to thank her she continued, "Noa, do-unt ee zay a word. 'Tis just doin' our duty as we-uns zees it."

She accompanied Lossie to the gate, pointing out the post-office and giving her directions as to the turnings she must take to get into the Graysbourne road.

Lossie invested her last penny in a stamp and, dropping the letter into the box, once more set her face in the direction of her old home. The day was grey with the promise of further snow, and the slight fall of the previous night lay in strips and patches where it had drifted under the hedges and against the walls. She made but slow progress, and noon was past when she topped the hill and looked down upon the valley where the village lay. Then she had to stop to think why she had come thither. She remembered at last. It was to see Ruth, the friend of her childhood, the friend who would give her comfort and rest. She hung back now she was so near, fearing she knew not what.

The village seemed in no wise altered from the time when as a light-hearted child she had clambered the hill to look down upon the cottages. She loitered a couple of hours and no human being came near her in the solitude. The cold did not seem to affect her though it was very bitter. The birds noticed it, flitting restlessly in the hedgerows and twittering anxiously. Once—twice—a flight of wild duck came from the north and passed overhead, forewarning of the approach of a winter storm. Then Lossie noted signs of animation in the village. A few people had gathered about the rectory gate and the bells jangled in the belfry. She took the downward path.

As she entered the confines of the village the bells rang out afresh. Oh! the mockery of the bells. A boy passed her, hastening to the place where the rest

of the villagers were gathered. Lossie stopped and questioned him as to what was going on.

“Paazon be coming whoam wi’ uns wife an’ they be gie’in’ we a tea in th’ school,” explained the lad.

The information told Lossie nothing. In her poor disordered brain her memory only worked fitfully and anything she had heard as to Rawlin’s succession to the living and of his marriage to Ruth had escaped. She followed the lad until she joined the throng of villagers. There was hardly one amongst them whom she did not recognise but she spoke to no one and was quite heedless of the curious eyes that were turned upon her. She had not to bear the scrutiny for long. The beat of horses’ hoofs and the sound of wheels rang out on the air and as a carriage and pair came into view the men raised a cheer. The vehicle stopped at the gate and Lossie was in the front rank of onlookers.

The Reverend Robert Rawlins was the first to alight, smiling his greetings to his faithful flock. He assisted his wife from the carriage and Lossie glancing mechanically caught a glimpse of Mrs. Rawlin’s face. Surely this was Ruth, yet—yet—this coldly beautiful woman, swathed in rich furs, was not the girl who had called her sister and bade her come to her in any trouble.

“Miss Ruth,” said Lossie timidly. Her voice was very low but it reached the ear for which it was intended.

Ruth turned and recognised Lossie in a glance. For a moment surprise kept her silent. “Lossie Grove! You here again?” she said, then she paused. Not for long, but in the few seconds were packed a whole host of wildly revengeful thoughts. The whole appearance of the girl showed that she was in distress, and it was she who had robbed her of Dalton’s love, in whose arms he had forgotten the troth he had plighted her. She felt a fierce joy as she noted the girl’s appearance.

“What do you want?” Her tone was repellent and Lossie shrank as from a blow.

"Miss Ruth," she repeated pleadingly.

"Mrs. Rawlins," corrected Ruth and Lossie winced again.

"You told me if I was in trouble to come to you and ——" She did not finish her appeal. The look in Ruth's face cut it short.

"That was when you were an honest girl, Lossie Grove." Ruth spoke the words clearly that every one might hear them and drawing her furs about her she turned away. Then she turned again to the girl, and taking a dainty purse from her muff, she took from it a piece of gold and tossed it to the girl. "This will enable you to get away from Graysbourne. It is more than you deserve, but I made you a promise."

Lossie had drank the cup of misery to the bottom at last and the dregs were of the bitterest. She made no reply. Her head sank down again upon her breast and she gathered her cloak about her shoulders clasping her hands inside upon her heart as she turned to depart. The villagers parted and she passed through them heedless of the ejaculations of the men and the shrinking away of the women. The coin still lay where it had fallen.

Her last hope had departed. She had hoped to find pity and there was no pity anywhere. But she must needs find some place to rest. There was no need to ask where. The whole world was before her.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE wide world was before her. A world full of scorn and blows. A world colder than the breath which came from the mighty lungs of the north in increasing strength.

The reception she had met with from Ruth stunned her for awhile. She had passed through the village before she really began to feel again and then—while her soul walked in darkness and the desolation beyond—a feverish strength came to her tired limbs and emaciated frame; a strength which carried her to the uplands where the wind chased the snow eddies over the brown bents of the pastures and the sheep sheltered themselves from the gathering storm behind the rounded bosses of furze. She bared her head and breast to the breeze and cried to Death to take her. But he passed her by though almost the sweep of his wings might have been heard. She met neither man nor woman, only the wind spirits were abroad, shrieking one to another, mocking her.

Her frenzy began to wear off as dusk began to fall, and her strength to fail again. The homing instinct carried her unconsciously along the paths she had trodden in childhood. Flitting past one or two cottages in the shadow she came at last to the cottage where she had lived as a girl. All was dark within and the glass was broken in the windows. The gate had been carried away and the palings were broken down. It was well. Here she might rest.

The front door was secured with a padlock and she only bruised her fingers in attempting to draw the

staple. She passed round to the back and found entrance there.

She was home at last. Home! Her lips fashioned the word and accompanied its utterance with a quaint soulless laugh. She found her way into the little chamber where she had been used to sleep. Her strength had all gone and she sank down in the corner where her bed had been. The pain had almost departed also from her head and heart and she felt as if soon she would be able to sleep. "God grant it, God grant it," she whispered. It was her first and only prayer.

The bells rang out again. There was no bitterness now in their joyous peal. The pain had quite left her. She felt almost happy. Her thoughts drifted back to childhood. She rambled again amongst the wild hyacinths in the woods and gathered the honeysuckles from the hedgerow. The scent was so strong that it stifled the reek of the mouldy floor and mildewed walls of the deserted cottage. She played again in the hay-field and felt again the heat of summer's burning sun. The snow which drifted in through the broken window was apple blossom or else the scattered petals of the white roses which were wont to blow all the summer long about the lattice. Again she wandered lazily along the towing-path or lay on the deck of the barge while the dragon-flies hovered over the rushes and tiny beetles performed their intricate dances on the still pools under the burning August sun.

The bells rang out again. She was with Frank drifting under Cliveden's shadowed banks and he was whispering that he loved her. She could feel his kisses and knew she was blushing under them. She was with him in the theatre. Her hand was in his and when she turned from the stage she could see him looking into her eyes with calm amusement at her excitement. She watched for him again from the balcony of the old

house at Peter's Wharf and saw him come into view adown the stream of light which stretched through the arches of Blackfriars Bridge. She was in his chambers again. They had dined alone together and the flash of the firelight and the rosy light of the lamp enveloped them again. His kisses were warm upon her lips. She tasted again the delicious sweets of her self-surrender. She stretched out her arms with a half-articulate cry. But he was gone.

The tears came at last. Not in riotous torrent, but in slow-forming heavy drops, gathering slowly under the long lashes until large enough to brim over and fall one by one in rhythmic splashes. Herein was heartsease at last. It was so good to weep where none might see, with the gentle darkness brooding over her.

Once more she became conscious that the bells were ringing still. So they should have rung for her wedding. She felt a momentary horror as she remembered what had befallen her, but it passed and the softer visions returned to delight her. Frank would come back to her soon, she felt assured. Then all her troubles would be at an end. He had told her that he would always look after her, in the letters which lay at her heart. She felt them there still. She was glad she had not lost them. If only she could read them once more before she slept. Again she stretched out her arms and to her wonder her hand fell on a little box. Surely it could not be a box of matches. Yes, and the box was nearly full. But it would not do to expect too much, perhaps they were damp and would not burn. The first broke under her trembling finger. It was with sickening anxiety she tried the second. It spluttered with a blue flame for a while and then burned up steadily.

She used her treasure carefully. One by one the store dwindled, each match burning right down until it blistered the fingers grasping the stump. But Lossie did not feel the burns. It was entrancing pleasure to

read her letters. She was so absorbed in her delight that she failed to hear the footsteps of a passer in the road. The man wondered what the flickering light that shone from the windows of the deserted cottage might be and went to the village public-house and talked of ghosts.

But the time came when the last match had burned itself out though the light had been prolonged by the box itself. Lossie knew that she could sleep now. The bells had ceased to chime. She pressed the letters to her lips as she lay down on the hard floor. She wished, perhaps, that the lights had lasted longer, for she could have read those sweet words for ever. But as she lay in the darkness waiting for rest she heard his voice. Her troubles were over at last. "Frank, my love," she cried. None heard, but she felt his kiss, the pressure of his arm about her, as she fell asleep.

CHAPTER XXXIII

WHEN Ryeland awoke from his slumber and found Lossie absent from his side he thought she had risen to perform her household duties and he dozed off again until the church bells aroused him. He had rung for her but she had not answered the summons. He laughed at the thought that this might be due to modesty. "She will soon lose that in my hands," he muttered and he went into the next room. There he saw no trace of the girl's presence. Everything was left as it had been the previous night. The plates were still on the table, the bowl of faded flowers, the dirty glasses, one half filled with dead champagne.

Nicholas returned to his bedroom and dressed hurriedly. He began to feel anxious. As soon as he had finished dressing he sought the girl in her own apartments. He could find no trace of her and he roused Grove to join him in the search. Both men remembered her rush to the balcony window and when they found the door downstairs unfastened and they stepped into the yard a common impulse led them both through the archway to the river side. There was no trace of her on the landing stage, but at the gate they found the keys and knew that she had gone out into the street. They both returned to the house. There was a hang-dog expression in the labourer's face and he seemed afraid to lift his eyes to his employer's.

Nicholas walked impatiently to and fro, staying once to draw the blinds and throw open the window. The room was insufferably close. Then he paused before the sideboard and he took one of the remaining gold-

topped bottles and drawing the cork filled a couple of glasses with the sparkling liquid.

"Perhaps this will help you to find your tongue," he said to Grove as he handed him the drink.

Grove emptied the tumbler at a draught and the result was soon apparent.

"She allus knocked I up in th' marnin' to zee to th' 'osses," he remarked. "I wor main veared when you come an' told I az her wor gone."

"Nothing can have happened to her," replied Ryeland assuming a confidence he by no means felt. "She would not have gone out of the front door else."

"Tha' be true," replied Philip.

"I don't know that it won't be best to give her a taste of the strap you talked about when she returns for leaving us in such a mess," continued Ryeland. "Meanwhile you had better see about your work."

Without reply Grove went about his duties. He was still half dazed from the effects of his debauch and he could hardly realise that Lossie had gone. "She be zhure to come back avore long," he continually repeated to himself.

But when he had finished his work and rejoined his master he lapsed into despondency. Nicholas was compelled to brace him up with three strong glasses of spirits before he could be got to understand the instructions which he thought necessary to give him in case Dalton should call and make inquiries.

Just after two o'clock the bell rang.

"It 'ull be th' little-un come back," said Philip and he hastened to answer the door.

But when the door swung open and Dalton's cheery voice gave him "good day" he forgot everything he had been coached to say and could only stand with half-opened mouth and gaze at the visitor.

"You seem surprised to see me," said Dalton. "Didn't Lossie tell you I was coming for her?"

Then Philip remembered. "Aye, zhure. But I didn't expect ee, seein' as th' little-un went out avore I wor up this marnin', an' I thought she must ha' gone to meet ee earlier."

"It was Frank's turn to look surprised, and he gazed helplessly at Grove for a minute or two before obtaining from Philip, by a series of rapid questions, the story with which Ryeland had carefully primed him. Lossie's action seemed inexplicable. He rushed back to his chambers, and finding that she had not put in an appearance there during his absence he returned once more to the wharf, firmly convinced that some accident must have befallen her. Then he was informed of Nicholas Ryeland's presence at the wharf, and, further, that in view of the girl's youth her employer had thought best to give information of her disappearance to the police, and had gone himself to do so. Almost distracted with apprehension Frank departed to make a tour of the hospitals.

As night swept down over the city, Ryeland and Grove came together again in the room where they had supped on the previous night. Grove had grown visibly haggard during the day and Ryeland did his best to cheer him. But at the same time he, too, began to feel alarmed. He had not imagined that a girl in her position could have really objected to the embraces of one so much above her. It was a sorry victory he had won after all, and now at last he cursed himself for his folly. And he could do nothing.

As they sat in the fitful light of the blazing coal a weird cry came up from the river. Both men felt their nerves quiver, and Nicholas jumping up with an oath struck a match and hastily lit the lamp. But Philip sat tense with a nameless horror in his eyes.

Nicholas gripping his collar roughly shook him vigorously. "Come, Grove, come," he said. "You ought to know the sound of a steamer's syren by this time."

Philip's gaze was still fixed. "Did—thee—yere—Lossie—call—Measter Nicholas?" he asked.

"Nonsense, you fool," replied Ryeland. "Here, drink this." "This" was a measure of brandy.

The neat spirit brought back the colour to the man's cheeks, but the perspiration dropped in big tears from his brow for some minutes afterwards.

"We must not let ourselves become morbid," said Ryeland. "You may depend upon it that the girl is safe enough."

Grove made no immediate reply. His uneasiness had at last began to be tinged with remorse, and presently he said timidly: "May-be I was dreamin', but I zeems to remember as th' clock struck one this marnin' that I hearn her cry out just like that syren".

Nicholas remembered. It was the moment when recovering from her swoon she had realised that she was in his arms, but he lied fluently. "You must have been dreaming," he said. "Nothing of the sort disturbed me."

To turn the subject of conversation he proposed tea and kept Philip employed in getting the materials. But when the meal had been disposed of and the utensils removed, the tension became greater with every quarter marked by the bells of St. Paul's.

Once their watch was interrupted by Dalton's return. He had nothing to tell them, they had nothing to communicate to him. Meanwhile the suspicion that her sudden disappearance was the outcome of some plot to prevent the marriage between Lossie and himself had taken strong harbourage in his mind. But Grove's anxiety was so marked that he dismissed the thought, and he could not conceive that Ryeland could have stooped to violence towards the girl. Accordingly he proposed to remain with them to share their watch, but Ryeland suggested that she might return first to Barnard's Inn rather than to the wharf fearing

her father's anger. So he returned to keep vigil alone.

Nor was there any rest for the other two watchers. Philip sat with his eyes on the door, and fear stooped down upon him again and laid her grey mantle upon his features. During the day they had emptied a bottle of brandy between them, and during the evening Ryeland opened a second. Now and again he gave a drop to Philip who, after gulping it down, recovered himself somewhat for a few minutes.

Midnight came, but no Lossie. The wind had risen, rattling the casement, and the rain swished in wild bursts against the windows. The old house seemed haunted by the devils of unrest and every board in it to cry out upon the evil which had been wrought upon the helpless girl therein. The door creaked, and Philip murmured, "It be she". But no, it was the wind. The window shook and he turned towards it, half fearing lest he should see her pale face and wide open eyes looking in upon him.

One o'clock struck. Philip had been fearing the stroke of the hour. The wind had lulled for awhile.

"Hark!" he said, raising his hand.

A sudden squall beat upon the house and bore a cry with it.

"Did you hear it?"

The tension was too great for Ryeland to bear. He broke out into wild profanity and invective, but his companion paid no heed.

"It were th' little-un's voice. Hark!" The squall died away. "She be gone."

Without waiting for permission, Philip picked up the bottle and pouring out for himself half a tumbler of the brandy, tossed it off at a draught.

Ryeland sprang up in alarm. "You d——d mad-man," he cried. "You'll kill yourself if you go on like that."

"She be gone vor to-night," said Philip. "She won't come back again zo long as you be here." He spoke as if he referred to undeniable facts, and Ryeland thought it well not to argue with him.

"Don't you think it would be as well for you to get off to bed, Grove? You won't be fit for much in the morning else," said Nicholas.

The labourer shuffled uneasily and it was almost in a whimper that he replied: "Zhure, do-unt ee zend I away vrom ee, Measter Nicholas. If you be by, she 'ull not come wi' those big eyes of hern an' look an' look at I as I lays in my zleep." His utterance was thick. His appearance wild. Though the room was uncomfortably hot Nicholas shivered. Delirium tremens certainly, madness possibly was revealed in Grove's manner, and he did not know how he could possibly leave him. He dared not propose to do so, and accordingly set himself to win his companion to equanimity by talk of the scenes in which their youthful lives had both been passed. After a while Philip dozed. Nicholas longed to sleep, but dared not. In a couple of hours Grove awakened suddenly, incoherent in his speech and vaguely fearful of big eyes which stared at him from the dark corners. He was drenched with perspiration, though cold as ice, and not until Ryeland had made some strong coffee and given it to him in large quantities did he become rational in his manner. He was not violent in any way. He clung to his employer's hand, and seemed to feel safe only while holding it.

At last day dawned, and only then Philip recovered his usual sullen demeanour. He seemed to be ashamed of his fright. Ryeland spoke to him seriously about it, warning him that he would be unable to spend another night in the same way, and Philip went off to his work in silence. His head was burning; his mouth parched with thirst. Neither of them mentioned Lossie's name.

All through that day Philip could find not a moment's respite from the assault of accusing thoughts. Lossie was dead and he had killed her. That was the whole burden of them. The walls cried out the charge to him. He read it in the eyes of the horses as he went amongst them, and when he saw two of the carmen chattering together in the yard he knew they could be discussing nothing else.

He sought his usual method of relief, but alcohol no longer proved to be an opiate. He dared not stand still for a moment, and even in his busiest moments he saw eyes that he knew were Lossie's gazing fixedly at him. They were the eyes of the dead.

And now in his muddled brain there came another thought. The accusation of the haunting eyes was reinforced by a voice which whispered incessantly in his ear. He could not get away from it, and at last he went into the house and fell to pleading with it.

"Let I be, little-un. I wor mad to let un lay hand on ee. I never thought, 'twas th' drink med I. Now do-unt ee zay as 'twere I, 'twere th' measter. Ee med I drunk, an' I never knowed what I done."

The voice was silent. It seemed as if his pleading had been successful. He listened with raised hand, looking into the shadows. Then the voice came back again. He heard two words distinctly.

"Kill him."

He almost shrieked as he turned round to face the speaker. There was no one, and again the words were hissed in his ear.

"Kill him."

"No, no," he cried. "They 'ull hang I vor it. I be-unt vit to die."

"Kill him."

He threw up his arms as if to ward off a blow and rushed from the room. But he could not escape from the voice. The offices were empty, and he locked

them and punctually performed every one of his duties, but the voice still pursued him. He roamed the streets and he could not outstrip the invisible speaker. He returned to Thames Street, and once more tried to find relief in drink. It was no use. When closing time arrived, the voice went with him again out into the night. He dared not enter the old house alone, and so until daybreak he roamed the streets. He drank again as soon as the early market hostelrys were open, but returned to the wharf as soon as the lamps paled in the dawn. He did not feel tired, but he knew vaguely that he ought to sleep, and when he had tended the horses and unlocked the offices he went upstairs to his own room to lie down. He had barely thrown himself upon the bed when a cry echoed in his ears and light footfalls came tripping up the stairs and paused outside his door. He raised himself on his elbow and listened. Besides the voice which cried "Kill him," there were other voices whispering together, plotting something. He could not hear what they said, but he knew that they were saying that they must get rid of him as well as Lossie. He rushed to the door. He would be revenged on all his enemies. Nobody was outside. But they should not escape him so. Downstairs he went, searching room by room, still no one to be seen, so up again until he had looked even into the lumber room at the top of the house where the old ledgers of the firm were stored.

He lay down again and he heard the plotters spin their plot all over again.

He sprang to his feet and went down to the yard. The men at work seemed to eye him curiously. When he approached they turned pale and hurried to the warehouse as if they had forgotten something. To Philip it seemed as if they knew what had been done in the old house and would not come near him lest his presence should bring a plague upon them. He felt thirsty and

suddenly weak. He must keep up his strength until he had obeyed the voice. His pockets were empty. He went back to the house again furtively as for a theft. He found no money in any of the drawers, and he dared not enter Lossie's room to search, but he had no hesitation about raiding his employer's apartments and searching through the pockets of his garments. He rent some of them with savage glee, and at last he found a florin. He clutched the coin eagerly and looked around him. He would come back when he had quenched his thirst and work still more destruction. He locked the door and departed with head erect and with flaming eyes. The foreman called to him as he passed the warehouse entrance, but Philip merely flung back a curse.

At the Friar's Head Philip demanded a quartern of whisky, and his appearance was so menacing that the barman who was alone at the time made haste to supply him. He repeated the dose, and taking the pewter measure in which it had been served he crushed it flat in his hand. His strength was still left to him. He went out to seek Ryeland.

As he entered the gateway he heard his employer's voice and hastened his steps. Yes, Ryeland was in the yard giving orders to one of the warehousemen. An inspector of police stood by his side, but of him Philip took no notice.

Nicholas noted his approach and beckoned to him. "I was just inquiring for you, Grove," he said. "Inspector Brown here has called to see whether you can give him any further particulars which will assist him in the search for your daughter."

Philip was taken aback. "Zarchin vor th' little-un?" he said.

His utterance was thick, and Ryeland said aside to the inspector, "I'm afraid the loss has made him drink. He was exceedingly fond of the girl."

“Zarchin’ vor Lossie, an’ she dead?” repeated Grove.

“Not so bad as that, I hope,” replied the inspector cheerfully. “We’ll find her for you, never fear.”

“Zhe be dead—dead—” said Philip, sidling nearer to Nicholas. “Do-unt I know it? ’Aven’t her telled I zo? Zhure bain’t her big eyes been starin’ starin’ at I all the night long? Can’t ee zee ’em there under th’ arch now?” His voice had grown hoarse and his eyes gleamed so wildly that Nicholas drew away from him. But Grove sidled nearer to him again. “There bain’t no rest vor I ontill I’ve zettled wi’ them as’druv her to it.”

His meaning could not be mistaken. Ryeland strove to frame some soothing reply, but he could think of nothing. He half turned to fly, but his feet seemed rooted to the earth. Philip was glaring at him, enjoying his terror. The uncertainty endured but for a second, but to Ryeland it seemed to last an age. Then with a wild shout Philip sprang upon him.

He was too late. The inspector had noted his condition and tripped him as he sprang, and other men were swift in lending assistance. Grove was manacled, his feet bound tightly, for his struggles were frightful and his shouts and ghastly laughter so horrible that they were forced to bear him into one of the inner rooms of the warehouse until an ambulance could be procured to take him to the hospital. He was raving more wildly than ever when he was at last taken away in the care of the inspector, whose prompt assistance Ryeland had hastened to reward with a handsome gratuity.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE encounter with Lossie on the threshold of her new home had a disturbing effect upon Ruth. When her husband picked up the coin she had tossed to the girl she replaced it in her purse mechanically and vouchsafed no reply to his remark that she would soon be able to discover some more worthy object of charity. He had not become less repulsive to her during the month of their honeymoon, but she had become familiarised to the acceptance of him as husband, and she had begun to think that she might eventually learn to endure him if he would only cease to talk to her of love. There was nothing of love, so it seemed to her, in the relationship between them. Indeed in her own eyes she had suffered such degradation that she sometimes classed herself as little better than the women who sold their bodies on the streets. This fate would never have befallen her if Dalton had remained true, and when Lossie, the cause of Dalton's faithlessness, had made her appearance, she had not hesitated before visiting her wrath upon the hapless girl. Her brother's falsehoods had so poisoned her mind that she felt for the moment a keen delight in the revenge she had been enabled to take. Apparently Dalton had tired of the girl and cast her off. Well, it was a just retribution that she should suffer.

But remembering Lossie's pathetic look of despair as she turned away Ruth could not help feeling uneasy. Why should the girl have come to her? Perhaps Nicholas had lied to her. No, what reason could he have had for so doing? She recalled the brotherly tone he had adopted when he had told her all he knew

about those two, the youth she had loved and the girl she had succoured and befriended. Yet the haunting despair in Lossie's eyes was not to be argued away. She strove to forget it. Her father and mother were at the rectory to welcome her home and she donned one of her prettiest frocks, and in talking with them put the memory aside for an hour or two. But at night it returned so vividly that she could not sleep, and when the morning came she determined to make inquiries in the village as to what had become of the girl.

Immediately after breakfast she went out. It was a brisk cold morning. There was an inch or two of snow in places sheltered from the wind. Winter had commenced early. Suppose Lossie had found no shelter. She shuddered as she contemplated such a possibility.

As she reached the high road she glanced from right to left undetermined where to commence her inquiries. Her eyes rested upon an advancing figure. For a moment she thought her senses had deceived her, then she reeled and had to cling to the gate from which she had emerged for support. That was Dalton approaching. She knew him at once. She would have known him amongst ten thousand. She would have fled, but she saw that he had seen and recognised her, and her pride forbade her to fly. He came towards her hurriedly, but she had time to observe how careworn was his face, the haggard look about his eyes and the hollows in his cheeks before he spoke to her.

"So we have met again?" said Dalton. "I suppose you hardly expected to see me in Graysbourne?" His voice was harsh.

She made no reply to his question. Her surprise at his appearance was too profound. Her bewilderment found expression in another question.

"Surely you could not have sent Lossie to me?"

Her stupefaction was completed by Dalton's reception of her query.

"Then you have seen her? My poor little Lossie. Where is she?" he cried. "Take me to her."

"I—I cannot," she faltered.

"But you must," he insisted. "She has promised to be my wife. I can only guess at the nature of the trouble which has made her fly from me, but I have traced her here and none but I can help her. Tell me where she is."

"But indeed I do not know where she is," replied Ruth.

"Not know where she is?" he asked. "But you must know. You say you have seen her. You surely cannot be a party to the hellish plot hatched by your brother to rob me of her love?" There was a dawning suspicion in his look.

"My brother?" she repeated. She was beginning to understand, though dimly.

"Your brother," he said again. "I have no evidence, but it was in his house that things have happened which have led her to take to flight, my poor little Lossie. But you need not fear. I will answer for her that she shall take no action. Only tell me where I may find her."

"Indeed I would tell you if it were in my power," she answered.

There was so evident a sincerity in her speech that he was convinced. He drew his hand wearily across his forehead and turned away.

"Tell me why she left you?" she said.

He told her as much as he knew. Of her disappearance from the wharf. Of Philip Grove's madness. His voice held a note of horror as he spoke of it.

"Is he better?" she asked, as he paused.

"He died last night," he answered briefly. "I wished to see him, but the doctors would not allow me near him. He raved to the last and strove to get free that he might be revenged upon somebody who had driven

his daughter to her death. I waited at the hospital to the end in case he might, in some moment of sanity, give me some clue to Lossie's whereabouts. When I got home I found this letter awaiting me." He handed a sheet of paper to her.

Ruth took and unfolded the paper mechanically. "Goodbye, Frank," she read. "Goodbye, my own dear love." She hastened over the words of endearment with a catch in her voice that was more than half of a sob. "You must forget me. I can never marry you now, though I do love you. More than ever, I think. It was not my fault. Don't think hardly of me, for indeed I fought against him, and I would have thrown myself from the window into the river, only he pulled me back. And then I fainted, I think, and now I cannot forget. He had made my father drunk and I was all alone, so you must not think hardly of me. I am heartbroken. I am going to a friend, and you must not seek me out. She promised——"

Ruth covered her eyes with her hand and uttered a low cry of horror. "She was going to a friend. She came to me, and I—oh! God!"

Dalton clutched her arm or she would have fallen.

"I judged by the postmark that she was making for Graysbourne, and I came on by the first train," he said.

"We must find her. We must find her," Ruth cried feverishly.

"Where shall we search?" asked Dalton. "What did she say to you of her intentions?"

"Then you do not know? You have not heard of how I treated her?" she asked miserably.

"I have but a minute ago arrived at the village," he answered.

"You—you will hate me," she wailed. "She came to me and—I—I sent her away." Then after a pause, "I had been told and believed that she had stolen your love away from me".

"Tell me all about it," he said, and she obeyed.

"Will you forgive me?" she asked humbly when she finished.

He held out his hand to her in token and they turned towards the village together. "Some of the villagers may have given her shelter," he said.

"I trust so," she replied, but there was no hope expressed in her voice.

They came to Grove's old cottage, and they both paused.

"Perhaps Lossie has taken shelter there," he said.

"Hardly," she answered. "Don't you see it is uninhabited?"

"At least I will see," he replied, as he entered the garden, and she followed him with a foreshadowing of impending calamity.

Going to the window he peered through one of the broken panes. "Ruth, come here!" His voice was pregnant with anxiety, but before she could get to his side he had turned to the door and wrenched away the staple which had defied Lossie's feeble attempts on the previous night.

Ruth followed him into the cottage, and as he paused at the door she saw the girl lying with a little drift of snow on the fold of her dress.

"Surely she is sleeping?" said Ruth.

Her head was pillowed on her arm and she smiled in her sleep. In her hand was a bundle of letters pressed closely to her heart, and by her side a tiny heap of the burned ends of matches.

"Surely she sleeps," repeated Ruth.

"Surely," answered Dalton. "Surely."

He knelt reverently beside her and pressed his lips to hers. He lifted one of the curls from which the glint of the gold had not yet faded and kissed that too. "My Lossie sleeps," he said, and he looked up at his companion with words of reproach on his tongue. But

they found no utterance, for he perceived that he was in the presence of a desolation as great as his own. Ruth's hands were locked, and she stared stonily at the figure lying so peacefully on the cottage floor.

"And I might have saved her," she was repeating hopelessly again and again. Dalton could say nothing. He had been about to make the same charge. Then with one great wild cry she knelt down beside the still form and her hair fell down and mingled with the dead girl's tresses, as she rained passionate tears and kisses upon the cold brow and lips.

Dalton left her alone for a couple of minutes, and when he returned Ruth was more composed, though the throbbing of her throat showed that the tempest of her sorrow was only temporarily stilled.

Dalton led her to the door. "Good-bye," he said simply.

Her face froze with sudden horror. "I cannot have your death on my conscience too," she cried. "Kill me first."

"You need not fear," he answered calmly. "I have work to do."

She mistook his meaning. "Ah, no, no," she pleaded. "She is at rest now, and he—he is my brother."

"I have no heart for revenge, even if it were within my grasp," he replied. "Nothing will ever bring back my little Lossie." His lip quivered a little.

"Good-bye." He held out his hand.

"You will try to forgive me?" she faltered.

"I can forgive you more easily than I can forgive myself for not watching more closely over her. You are as much a victim as I or my Lossie——"

"Oh! if only I were in her place. She is at rest and I——" Sobs choked her utterance and she turned away.

He closed the door, but as she passed the window she heard the cry he could no longer restrain, and she pressed her hands upon her ears as she hastened her steps lest she should come into knowledge of his agony.

EPILOGUE

A MAN and a woman were walking slowly down the Victoria Embankment. She was not yet thirty, and walked with the spring of a girl. She was beautiful—with the beauty of Eve after she had eaten of the fruit of the tree of knowledge and discovered that pain is a common heritage. He was a strong thoughtful-faced man with two or three more years to his credit than she could claim. There was no pallor about him, though a stoop of his shoulders showed that he spent a good many hours at his desk.

“I must take you to see the place where she lived,” he was saying, “though so long as your brother owns the wharf we can never set foot in the place.”

“How he has prospered,” she replied. “The evil he did seems to have brought him no remorse.”

“Wealth has hardened his heart, I suppose,” he answered.

“Can you ever forget that I am his sister, Frank?”

“You do not doubt me surely, Ruth?”

“No. It was foolish of me to ask,” she said. She smiled upon him serenely and pressed his arm more closely to her side.

They took a boat at the Temple Stairs, and she took the ropes, while he pulled out into the current. People wondered to see such a couple on the water between bridges.

In a couple of minutes they were opposite Peter's Wharf. “See, it was there on the second balcony that she used to wait and watch for me. Directly I came

under the bridge I used to see her handkerchief wave a welcome."

"Poor little Lossie," said Ruth softly. "In return for my cruelty she restored you to me."

"Hush, Ruth. You have promised me that you will never reproach yourself."

"How can I help it?" she answered. "But now, on the eve of my great happiness, I cannot help thinking of the time when I sent her away to die."

There was silence between them while the boat drifted.

"Did I tell you," she continued presently, "that the village children always bring violets and primroses to lay on her grave? The other day when I was in Grays-bourne it was smothered with the fresh spoils of the woodlands, while there was not a blossom on his?"

"His?" said Dalton.

"My husband's," she answered quietly.

Again there was silence, but this time the man broke it.

"Why did not you write to me when you were free?" he asked.

"How could I?" she replied. "Cannot you picture my shame and my grief at the injury I had done you. If you had not insisted on speaking to me that day we met in Oxford Street we should possibly never have met again."

"It was a happy chance, dear," he said.

"For me it was," she answered earnestly. "Tomorrow I feel as if I shall begin to live."

So they talked while the boat drifted and, when the tide turned, they came back toward the setting sun along a golden way, which to Ruth's imagination was the veritable path Lossie had trodden before her.

THE END

